망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

-Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 4 -

-AUTHOR-

Glump

[Active Translations]

CHAPTER 150
THE NOBLE IS NOT NOBLE WITHOUT REASON (1)

I slept most of the day. In my waking hours, I was very busy, with all my time taken up by people of Dotrin who came to talk to me. Many visited – they were the knights and nobles of the outpost who had survived the running battle through the forest.

They thanked me again and again, saying that they were able to survive the pursuit of the imperial wizards due to my efforts. I was proud until the same scene played out the next day, the day after that, and the day after that day. It might have been one or two good words that they spoke to me, and it wasn't that painful to share stories of our mutual trials.

Yet, no longer able to bear it, I blocked all visitors from my tent on the pretext that I had to recover my strength.

I closed my eyes, pretending to sleep if anyone just so happened to enter my barracks. I cursed the name of Bernardo, who couldn't play the part of gatekeeper properly.

"What? Asleep?"

I gently opened my eyes as I heard a familiar voice, and there stood Jin and Doris.

Seeing my open eyes, Doris laughed at me with that clear face of his. He said I wasn't a boy, so I shouldn't be pretending to sleep. However, the prince laughed only for a while, for stern-faced Jin soon spoke up, asking me for my understanding.

It was widely believed that the recent fighting went to and fro, with equal exchanges between Dotrin and Burgundy, but the reality of things was that the recent battle was a defeat for Dotrin: Their entire outpost had been destroyed.

Dotrin's command felt the need to focus the attention of their troops on something to quell their fears and boost their morale.

This was why Jin and Doris now came to me, I who had taken such great strides in that battle. In other words, they wanted to create a hero for the common soldier to believe in, instead of letting their minds wander to the past defeats.

“You have your Sky Knights. So why me?”

Doris responded with a somewhat stern face to my question, saying that the Knights of the Sky would soon leave the frontlines and head for the southernmost coastal fortress of Dotrin.

He told me that a large imperial fleet has sailed to the southern sea of Dotrin. It was a large armada with about seventy ships. The estimated number of troops who wished to make landfall ranged from 12,000 to 14,000 – which was a low number when compared to the imperial forces who crouched in the forest.

However, Doris considered it likely that the fleet was the true invasion force of the empire. Jin explained this to me. Up to now, the imperial forces who have crossed into Dotrin were almost all conscripts mainly drummed up for the war by nobles from a variety of places.

Their command structure was also in tatters, with commanders with no military proficiency placed at the head of the army. On the other side of the coin, the fleet that appeared on the South Sea consisted of regular legions of the imperial army. It was a true army.

“That means…” I frowned, and Jin replied with a firm voice, “The imperial army in the forest is a diversion.”

I was speechless by the absurdity of such a thought. The troops numbered a little over 100,000, and with the additional power of their knights and wizards, that entire army was about as strong as the whole kingdom of Dotrin.

But they were just the bait – even if the flesh and blood of the emperor was part of that bait.

“The emperor’s pledge that the princeps who makes the greatest contribution to the war is to become his heir was actually an empty promise,” said Jin.

“This is the empire, and the emperor is our true enemy,” said Doris with a heavy voice.

How terrible a monster was our foe; how heartless the emperor. Doris spoke so of him.

“From our point of view, even if we knew they were a diversion, we couldn’t draw back our troops to deploy them somewhere else.”

Just because the emperor used the army led by the princeps as a bluff before he drew his trump card, that army couldn’t be dismissed. Aside from the poor skill of the commanders and the quality of the troops, the enormous number of soldiers in itself posed a threat to Dotrin’s survival.

“We need stability. If we make the Knights of the Sky the heroes of the common soldier, the soldiers will be anxious when the knights leave,” Jin said, asking for my patience in a respectful tone. I politely bowed my head.

“We must ensure that there is someone they can look up to in the camp itself. Someone who remains with them.”

“Please tell us in advance before you leave. Anyone who bothers your Highness, who must be devoted to recovery, will face a court-martial, be sure of it.”

That was it, and the conversation was about to arrive at its inevitable end.

“What about the promise?” an idle voice interjected. Bernardo Eli was standing at the entrance, looking at Doris with a cold face.

“Originally, he said he’d allow us to leave whenever we want. He promised to put a wyvern on standby so that we could return to Leonberg whenever we wished. Didn’t you promise as much?” demanded Eli.

“The promise still holds-“

“That’s good. But now you made up some cause to tie his Highness down here so that he doesn’t leave the front lines. Even if your promise is still valid, it is clear you don’t want his Highness to leave the front, or it’ll make your soldiers anxious.”

Eli was now becoming very hostile, and he opened his mouth to continue but addressed me instead.

“Your Highness, don’t you know it? How Dotrin is using you? The one who claims to

be your Highness's friend is only trying to stabilize his ranks by leaving his friend, who is in discomfort, so near the battle lines. He wants to mollify his soldiers, who don't know when the imperial troops will break out of the forest and begin their massed advance."

Bernardo Eli wasn't sarcastic, nor was his a fiery anger. His voice was cold, and through this, I could feel how great his anger truly was.

"I realized it only after your Highness fell. They truly mean to conceal your identity and make you fight as a mercenary in another country's war," said Eli.

"It's my choice if I want to stay here. I didn't come for the sake of the public good," came my reply.

"You do not deserve to die here. It will not be your death," he insisted.

I wanted to end this unproductive debate, so I suddenly looked Eli in the eye, trying to let him know that he had to go. It was then that I saw how afraid he was for my sake.

"Your Highness is the hope of Leonberg. If something goes wrong with your Highness here, everything will have been in vain."

I replied by saying that he was exaggerating, yet Eli denied this. Then I saw what he was getting at for myself: While we had been in the empire, the north, which had seemed so strong, began to divide.

"If your Highness dies here, Leonberg loses everything. His anxiety and fear pierced my chest.

I knew it too – the burning will of independence that has been lighted was in truth nothing more than a smoldering ember which has caught flame on wet firewood.

If even a weak breeze blew, it would disappear once more. To think of it was to invite sorrow.

Leonberg still needed a windshield so that the fire could blaze, and that was my role.

"You're not wrong, Bernardo."

I studied Eli's face, for I didn't believe I would fall in this place and make all our efforts amount to naught.

However, I could see Eli did not trust my word.

"What if the enemy's archmage, who has scorched the outpost to cinders and almost crisped your Highness like a fowl, attacks the main force of Dotrin? Are you sure you'll be okay then?"

I had a response ready.

"No, the next time will be different. If he appears again, I won't just be standing still and taking it."

I wasn't just saying that. Muhunshi poems grow the soul as you recite them, and [Mythic] level poems are like a super-nutrient that far outclass the other poetic levels.

I used a [Myth] myself – and even though I had been aided by Agnes – my body still experienced the [Mythic] level when it acted as a medium.

I wagered that when my softened heart hardens, I would have a much larger and stronger mana heart than before.

I knew the arch-wizard was coming, but things wouldn't be like before – I awaited his appearance, for through it, I would gain my revenge.

But Bernardo dismissed my viewpoint time and time again until Jin finally intervened.

"As a countermeasure against the great imperial wizard and his thunder, Dotrin's mage-class wizards are coming to the front lines, so don't worry."

"Ah! Then those handsome mages of Dotrin can protect this camp," Eli responded with a laugh.

"Knights and wizards are essentially different. Wizards will never make out the brunt of an attack. The wizards will work their miracles safely from the rear and bring ruin upon the foe, but they cannot press an advantage." said Jin.

“Then the Sky Knights can remain here. You have no Sword Master in Dotrin, yes? I don’t understand why you’re trying to overload his Highness, whose body is yet to heal,” came Eli’s refutation, saying that this was Dotrin’s war. As I listened to the heated argument, I watched Doris. His face was wracked by indecision.

I didn’t know if it was because Eli was warping his intentions or if he was just embarrassed by the atmosphere that reigned in the tent.

The only thing I was certain of was that Doris didn’t want to use or abuse me, for he was a great noble man who did not use others for personal gain.

“Jin, stop,” Doris ordered.

“In truth, the cause of this war is due to Leonberg’s mission and-“

“Stop!” Doris commanded his friend, his face stern.

“If we want to talk about justifications, I am the one who must take responsibility. His Majesty said that, and I think the same thing,” said Jin, not shutting up, grabbing onto me and exclaiming, “Your Highness, I don’t know what the others think, but I think it’s reasonable for your Highness to feel responsible for this war as-“

“Enough!” shouted Doris, and his face, always filled with mirth, was now set in stone. His eyes trembled with anger. There was no sign of his normal clownish persona.

“Don’t be ashamed for my sake anymore, Jin.”

Only the prince who led his country and his knights was there in that tent.

“Highness!” protested Jin.

“If you say a single word more, I will discharge you as vice-commander and send you to the rear. This is a formal order I give to you as the commander of Dotrin’s Wyvern Knights, vice-commander Katrin.”

As he heard those words, Jin shut his mouth. The prince then began to apologize politely.

“I’m sorry. Leonberg is not the cause of this war. It would have come. Sooner or later, the empire would have warred against us. Rather, it is thanks to you that many

people have their lives, so Dotrin should only be grateful."

Doris bowed his head. Jin tried to say something again, but when he saw Doris's cold eyes, he kept his mouth shut.

"You can leave whenever you want. As Bernardo Eli said, this is our land. Forcing someone to bleed in our stead is an affront against our ancestors."

Doris apologized several times more and then immediately gave Jin his orders.

"Leave the swiftest of the wyverns here so that their party can, at any time, return to Leonberg."

Jin did not answer. His face brimmed with emotion, and he brought his fist to his chest.

"Did you hear me!" shouted Doris, and only then did Jin reply.

"I know, I know! Leave the good ones! I'm the bad guy every time, damn it!"

Jin could no longer take it and stormed out of the tent.

"It's a shameful statement, but please understand Jin."

"I don't understand him, yet I don't resent him for his words."

Every person has their own take on reality, and I would have acted similarly were I in his position.

"Thanks to all of this, my thoughts have become clear," said the prince.

"Doris Dotrin is here for Dotrin. I exist for my kingdom."

* * *

Doris had said goodbye.

Although the conversation became heated in the middle, it seemed that he had actually visited by barracks to say goodbye before he left for the south and also to make a single request.

That request bred conflict, but I had no regrets. I promised him that I would always repay the friendship and goodwill he had shown me.

“I look forward to seeing you again, my friend,” Doris clasped my hand and gave me a meaningful look. He then left the barracks, bowing his head to Eli before doing so. Faced with the selfless nature of the prince, Eli couldn’t act angry anymore and bowed his head low in return.

After Doris left, Eli began making excuses.

“It was an honest visit to say goodbye, but the vice-commander encouraged argument. His Highness Doris now feels responsible, but I have no doubt of his sincerity in coming here. But that fox-like vice-commander is a different matter.”

After asking Eli about what he had done all day, he told me he was studying the state of the war. His talent on such topics shone through as he spoke.

“But are we really going to leave?” he finally asked me.

“Why not? Wasn’t it you who said that we shouldn’t become too involved in the wars of others?

“It is so, it is so. But your Highness does not have a personality that considers the opinions of others.”

“Now that’s quite the open evaluation to tell a prince to his face.”

“It is just a very honest deduction based on the facts.”

Eli, his voice now softer, asked again, “Are we truly going to leave?”

“Not right now, but I do have to go back.”

In fact, I had heard stories through Berg Berten of things that had only existed in the past now reappearing all across the forests.

The world had changed, and this change was not limited to Dotrin, but the entire world.

Leonberg could not have escaped this cataclysm.

Furthermore, since Leonberg was a kingdom forged by expelling non-humans, it would not be strange if things were happening there right now, no matter what.

“Then we have to go back in haste!” Eli exclaimed as I told him such things.

I shook my head, for I couldn’t leave immediately. Before I left, I had to achieve the purpose that had originally drawn me to Dotrin. Bernardo Eli asked me what my true purpose was.

“I have to create a Sword Master.”

Adelia, who had just then entered the tent with a meal, flinched and trembled when she looked at me – Adelia, a meek [Butcher] who cannot so much as swing a butter knife at people.

The forests were overflowing with non-humans. Such foes were enough to forge a Sword Master, to make them vault over the wall of completion.

“I see,” said Eli, and he knew what I meant. It looked as if he was pitying Adelia and the hardship she would soon face.

“I’m also going out?” he asked.

“Yeah. You are also a Sword Expert.”

Eli was sweating as he heard my words.

“You want one of us to become a Sword Master. I guess it won’t be easy.”

“Of course not.”

As I answered, I quickly noticed that Bernardo Eli couldn’t get rid of his anxiety.

CHAPTER 151
THE NOBLE IS NOT NOBLE WITHOUT REASON (2)

Gunn had returned.

(Full Monsters) she told me of the situation in the forest without hesitation.

(Enemy Battle Monsters)

Through her, I learned that the Imperial Army was suffering from the monsters to such an extent that they cared little for attacking Dotrin.

“What kind of monsters?”

Gunn frowned as I asked this.

(Trees Beasts, Half-men)

Unfortunately, she did not know exactly what kind of monsters they were.

She couldn’t help it. If Gunn were a pure-blooded elf, she would have known the ancient monsters well. Yet, Gunn was a half-elf, and their lifespans were incomparable to those of true elves. Moreover, they were not permitted to access the lore and traditions of elves.

“Good work,” I said and patted her shoulders.

Gunn hesitated, then touched her lips once more.

(Many Monsters, Forest. Dangerous)

Eli was watching us with an anxious face, then asked, “Are you really going to do it?”

I didn’t bother giving an answer.

“Are we really going to do it?” Bernardo Eli asked once more.

* * *

“I did it! I really did it!” Eli exclaimed loudly.

‘Skaskakskak~’

His shouts were soon deafened by an eerie sound as if that of hundreds of snakes slithering.

Hundreds of branches, vines, and roots were darting at him, wishing to thirst upon the blood of living humans.

‘Fwoo!’ a clear sound broke over the creaking noises, and it was the sound of a sword. Eli had now started his battle with the evil spirit tree, the treant, in earnest.

The aura on Eli’s blade shone as it sliced and slashed, a beam of light that cut through the multiple limbs of the cursed treant. However, the number of roots and branches did not seem to decrease in number, no matter how many of them he severed.

“You have to attack the body,” I advised.

“As if I don’t know that!” shouted Eli, “As things are now, how do I even get close to the body!?”

As I heard him shout, I chuckled and then laughed. For some reason, I felt the faint stirring of old memories in my mind.

I had always been like this when I was a sword: I only advised and observed.

{Well, now this is bad to bear}

I heard the voice of Agnes, and unlike usual, it sounded rather petulant.

But she quickly regained her accustomed sibilance and told me {Is that child truly my descendant? I cannot believe it. How can she be so weak?}

And there stood Adelia: Looking at the treant, clutching onto her sword, her face full

of terror.

Unfortunately, the first foe we meet in the forest was not one that could trigger her [Butcher] and [War Mania] traits at all. And if those traits were inactive, Adelia was just a timid woman.

“Ann, hide your energy for a while.”

{If it feels dangerous, I will return.}

After that, Agnes was silent.

‘Skraskarakrr~’ some of the branches were reaching out to Eli, trembled, and then turned toward us. Now that the energy of my true body was hidden, it seems that the treant was willing to touch us.

As she saw the tentacle-like branches approaching, Adelia’s face became pale, shaken. She was trembling so much that it looked as if she would drop her sword at any moment.

“Bernardo Eli is overwhelmed by the limbs, and I can’t use my mana to get rid of them. So you must protect me,” I said quietly to Adelia.

I couldn’t have spoken in a softer tone, yet she still trembled after hearing my words of encouragement. But I had to make her know that she was not alone. Adelia had been through many battles thus far. Nevertheless, her mind remained that of a meek maid’s.

This is because she has never overcome her fears.

For her, it was either innocence or a bloody rampage by sword under the control of [Butcher] and [War Mania].

There was nothing in between, and so Adelia could not cross the wall.

To become a Sword Master was to reach a state of completion, a supreme existence that was unreachable by those who did not achieve harmony between body and mind. It wasn’t something that could be achieved by a person who had never swung a sword by her own will.

Without borrowing power from her traits, Adelia could not overcome her fears. No one else could wield her sword for her. If she could not overcome her terror, she would stay at her level for life – A sharp yet useless sword.

And as she had been on the sidelines of many battles up to now, she continued to fall behind.

'Skraakrakra~'

Tens of branches reached toward us. Adelia looked at me with a face that seemed as if it would burst into tears at any moment.

"Well, I…"

Instead of comforting her, I pressed by asking, "Adelia Bavaria, are you a knight – or a maid?"

Adelia gave no answer; she just shifted her trembling gaze between me and the approaching branches.

I stuck my sword into the ground, my true body, and then told Adelia, "If you can't save me, I'll die."

Several of the reaching branches hissed like snakes, for despite Dragon Slayer's energy having been banished, the treant was still wary.

The hesitation did not last long. The appetite of the evil spirit within the tree was far too great to ignore the terrified woman and the man, not one of them protected by mana.

'Skrakchuk!' a branch struck against me with its sharp tip.

"Your Highness!"

However, I did not draw Dragon Slayer from the ground, nor did I unsheathe Twilight from my back.

I didn't move a muscle – I just stared into Adelia's pale face.

The branch withdrew and struck at my shoulder like a snapping whip.

`Kwaatcha!'

The treant's branch scraped over my iron pauldrons, making a creepy, grinding sound. However, it could not penetrate through the hard metal and just scratched across the surface.

`Grukg, Grukg,' the branches wandered over my armor, seeking soft, exposed flesh.

Adelia ran toward me, screaming – and she wasn't thinking straight.

Without even considering slashing out with the sword in her grasp, she grabbed the branches with her bare hands and started pulling them from me.

A branch that sensed the texture of her supple flesh turned its tip toward Adelia.

'Gwack~' I reached out and grabbed the branch before it pierced into her. The treant's limb squirmed in the clutch of my iron gauntlet, then started to wound around my forearm like a snake.

Unlike my gauntlets and pauldrons, my vambraces were of leather and so were penetrated at once, a branch latching onto the skin beneath. The branches of the treant hovered around my arm as if awaiting their turn.

`Gschulp~'

Blood began draining from me with a tingling pain. There was not even the scent of blood, for even that was sucked up by the thirsty spirit tree.

"Highness! Highness!" Adelia screamed as she clung onto the branches, trying to pull them from my forearm. A ravenous blood-sucking branch reached out to Adelia, and her face visibly paled.

In the next instant, the branches of the excited treant were flying in. I grabbed Adelia and shoved her behind me, and dozens of branches slammed into me.

My armor was dented and ripped askew. Until that moment, Adelia was staring at me blankly, as if she didn't understand what was happening. I glanced behind me. All the branches that had pulled away my armor raised their tips and hissed. It seemed that they were greatly pleased by their imminent meal.

I glanced at Adelia and saw that a golden glow had entered her eyes.

It was an auspicious light so clearly different from that of [Butcher] and [War Mania].

'Ssssaassaak~'

And in the next instant, a golden arc flashed all around me.

`Tchoo-duk-duk-duk~'

Severed branches fell all over the ground, and as I watched the cut limbs wither and turn black, I turned to Adelia. Even if her hands were still trembling and her face so close to crying, Adelia was wielding a sword by her own will.

I erupted into joyous laughter. Adelia severed the branches that had wound around my forearms and waist and then desperately yanked away the one sucking from my wrist.

The branch fell to the ground, and so did a sliver of my flesh. The smell of blood spread into the air.

"Huh? Uh? What are you guys doing?" Eli asked. Adelia held onto me, and her slender shoulders were shaking. Was she crying or just trembling? I didn't know, I just saw countless tentacles suddenly rush at her. I rested my hand lightly on my true body.

{You're holding your body back too much} Agnes scolded me for hesitating to wield Dragon Slayer.

"If the danger is great, you or someone else will come out."

{Even if I do come out, I won't be able to calm the appetite of evil spirits who have already tasted blood}

"I can do it myself."

Anne had warned me that I lacked the energy to deal with the treant's limbs, but that wasn't true. Even without drawing Twilight, I knew I could sever the branches. No matter how great the lack of mana, a Sword Master is still a Sword Master.

Of course, it would be hard to reach the body of the evil spirit tree.

‘Fwap!’

Just then, a dazzling gold radiance erupted right in front of me, and branches and roots were scattered all over. Those branches that flocked in time after time were sliced and snapped by a shining sword.

Adelia was on the attack and laughed happily.

She has neared that wall – Adelia Bavaria the knight, not Adelia the maid, has just taken her first steps.

* * *

Once the battle was done, Adelia burst out in tears as she leaned over her sword.

“Blood… I’m sorry, your Highness. I’m sorry, your Highness.”

She kept weeping, constantly apologizing to me.

“It’s not as it was cut off. It’s just a little scratch,” Bernardo Eli pointed out. His own body was bloodied, full of cuts and gashes. Where his skin was exposed, signs of sucking wounds were seen. His complexion was pale. Neither Gunn nor Adelia cared about Eli – while the women were tending to the wound on my forearm, applying poultice and bandaging it, Bernardo Eli had to heal his body on his own.

He expressed resentment about this fact, and they ignored him. I giggled and laughed at Eli, yet even as I did so, my head was spinning. I knew that the world had changed, but now that I saw it with my own eyes, the changes were far greater than I had expected.

I had never imagined that I would see the ancient, evil spirit trees once more.

If the elves saw this, they would faint in horror, for it was they who had wiped the treants out.

As the elves began settling the forests to hide from the wyverns in the sky, they made sure that the spirit trees became extinct.

However, the treants have once more appeared in the territories dominated by the descendants of the Sky Knight, Umbert, who had ages ago forced his terrible faerie

enemies to flee into the forests.

It was a terrible omen. What else was in this forest? What other entities have come back to the world?

As if in answer to my question, a howl came from afar.

'Hawoooohooo~'

"Why type of wolf howls like that?" asked Eli with a curious face.

It was just as he said, for the howl was far too ominous to be the cry of a common beast.

I knew well that it was no ordinary wolf.

"The full moon…"

It was clearly the howl of a lycanthrope, a follower of the Plague Lord.

'Aooow!'

'Hoooowooo!'

One howl quickly turned into dozens, hundreds.

"We have to go back," came my swift order.

Eli frowned at my words, for we had planned to return later.

"What's wrong with those wolves? Or is it because you don't have mana that you won't be able to face them?" Eli asked, but quickly shut his mouth when he saw my face. I ignored his jibe, instead urging Adelia and Gunn to pick up the pace.

So, we fled from the forest in haste. The howling of wolves continued to follow us as we made our way from the forest and reached the main camp – howls which never grew distant, yet never came closer.

* * *

While the day was bright, I wandered through the forest. Then, as the day darkened, I returned and reported all I had seen in the forests to the commanders of the Dotrin Royal Army.

Berg Berten generously paid me for my information.

I asked him how rich he was that he could remunerate me so generously, and his old knights gave me a hint. They said that the Bertens was one of the greatest noble families in Dotrin. Berg wasn't just an aristocrat – he was one of the three Dukes of the kingdom. And yet, a man with such a title renounced his position and started following me around.

"He's a very weird old man," I muttered whenever I saw a man who would have been like a king in Leonberg leading a gaggle of old men onto the battlefield.

Anyway, on my part, I appreciated it that Berg valued information to such an extent. Now I didn't get money from only killing knights. Two birds with one stone sounded like the proper idiom in this scenario.

And each day, we headed into the forest in search of evil spirit trees.

Adelia had only taken up the sword on that first day because I had been in danger. Now, she wielded the sword well by her own will. One thing remained the same: Adelia still shook and trembled, unable to overcome the tension and fear. No matter, she still fought well, tearing through the accursed treants.

Adelia's swordsmanship was inherited from her ancestor Agnes, who was a slayer of giants. It was truly ruthless. So, little by little, Adelia was getting used to battle. Certainly, this was only possible because her foe was a barren old tree that did not bleed. I wasn't sure what Adelia would do were she to face sapient enemies.

Even Eli, who had mostly been busy plucking branches away from where they sucked on his flesh, was improving. He had gotten used to dealing with the treants as of late.

Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra joined us sometime later, also testing their mettle against the spirit trees.

Everything was going well, except for the existence of the lycanthropes. There were no more ominous howls and no signs of their presence, but they were certainly there. They wandered around our party, endlessly searching for victims.

It had only been that first day when they had so loudly threatened us, and this was natural.

They weren't low-level beings driven only by their appetites, like the treants, so they knew how to bide their time and turn a situation to their favor.

In explanation: They were conducting a thorough study of us.

Are we a delicacy that they could sink their fangs into at any time, or we more like poisonous mushrooms that would sicken them once they consumed us?

Under the surveillance of such secretive onlookers, our party continued to hunt the vile spirit trees.

Adelia had reached the verge of no longer being afraid of the treants. Not so long ago, she had been fearful of cutting even through a single branch, yet now she deftly severed a branch for every slash of her blade.

It was a great development, but that was all – Adelia would never be able to cross the wall merely by wielding her sword against old trees, the nature of them being so obscure that they could barely be called living beings.

At a time like this, battles against monsters of flesh and blood were necessary.

It was on this day that a giant wolf blocked our party.

`Krsha,' the giant wolf arose from the foliage, standing on its hind legs. And it didn't just lift itself in such a manner for a brief moment – the beast stood tall, bipedal like a human.

Adelia was terrified as she saw the huge lycanthrope, twice as large as the average adult male.

She was as fear-filled as the day when she had first entered the forest before she had slain treants.

The same was true for Eli, Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra. They couldn't hide their tension as they watched a giant wolf standing upon two legs.

Their reaction was natural – this was no common monster.

It was a messenger sent by the king of the full-moon race, of the fierce half-men.

And the message this herald of the full moon brought to us was bleak: Plague; or death.

'Krsh,' the lycanthrope hunched low. I chuckled a little as I saw how full of hostility and murder the beast was. "Do you think you can kill him without getting bitten?" I asked as I laughed.

"So, is your mana back then?" Eli asked, his tone resentful.

"No. I don't even have a handful."

Eli raised his eyebrows.

"Why, is there no place for a knight without mana here? You think we're all going to die now?" Eli demanded.

I laughed at his sharp words, saying, "It could be so."

Bernardo Eli almost had a seizure as I spoke so casually, yet I got the first word in.

"Eli!"

"What?"

"If you have any of your family's poetry that you have kept hidden, you should recite it today."

Eli flinched and then trembled as he heard my words.

"If you don't, we'll really die."

The lycanthrope slammed its hands to the ground and charged at us in a lope.

CHAPTER 152
THE NOBLE IS NOT NOBLE WITHOUT REASON (3)

Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra stepped forward at once, swords at the ready.

“Don’t allow small wounds! Even through the slightest wound in your flesh can the mutating plague be transmitted!”

Upon my warning, the three knights charging at the lycanthrope stretched their swords out.

‘Grarr! Grrr!’

In the next instant, the lycanthrope overwhelmed them, sweeping its clawed hand toward the three knights.

‘Qawac!’

The knights either dodged or blocked the swipe, and then they stepped forward and counterattacked.

That was the beginning.

In a vicious melee, three swords clashed with claws.

Bernardo Eli still hadn’t moved; he was hesitating. And I knew right away why he was doing so.

Eli: Even when the world changed due to the use of mana rings, even after mana hearts were treated as a cheap technique for mercenaries – Even then, the Eli family insisted on using mana hearts till the very end.

At one time, they were called the greatest family of knights in the kingdom. And not so long ago, Bernardo ran a decadent club in the capital, robbing the pockets of

stupid and lustful nobles.

The poor man was now afraid, afraid of drawing his sword and reciting his family's dance poem.

Over the years, the swords of the family have all but broken, with the martial arts of the family becoming neglected. Eli feared that his life's work might be denied: That of reconstruction and restoration of his family to their former glory. Bernardo had reached a point where he would rather stop than move forward and fail.

Just as the lives of his father and grandfather have been marked by defeat, Eli feared that he would remain a loser as well.

So he concealed his true self under a sophisticated veneer. He concealed his skills, acting as if he was but the sheath instead of the blade.

All of this so that he could have an excuse once failure came.

He said he would not do his best, believing that it was the nature of his family.

It was so tragic, so sorrowful. I looked at Adelia and then looked at Eli once more. Both of them trembled in terror. Death and pain, or failure and defeat: Each of them had different fears.

Yet, the fact that they couldn't overcome these fears prevented them from leaping over that wall.

My dear, dear coward knights – it was a pity.

At that moment, the thought of it was so unbearable that I could only watch. Fear is what they should overcome, and if I stepped forward to end their fears for a brief moment, they would never step nearer the wall.

Bernardo was sick, and Adelia trembled. I merely watched.

'Graar~'

In the next moment, a low growl was heard, clearly not coming from where the battle raged. Then, from the shadows of the forest, another bipedal wolf appeared, another herald sent by the full moon.

He hunched low as he approached us. Adelia looked at the three fighting knights, tears streaking down her face. However, Kampra, Trindall, and Gwain were hard-pressed to deal with the single enemy before them, so they had no time to worry about this one.

Adelia looked at me again, her eyes beseeching me, begging me to give her the order to fight. I ignored her unspoken request.

She trembled yet stepped forward. She placed herself between me and the lycanthrope, stopping. Her delicate shoulders were shaking with fear.

Nevertheless, she did not withdraw.

As I looked over her shoulder, a golden glow flared up. The light was too weak to be compared with her usual berserker one, but it meant more to me than anything else. It wasn't by anyone's command. Adelia had drawn her sword by her own will. I laughed in joy as I appreciated her newfound boldness. But unfortunately, with her body stiffened by tension and fear, it was impossible for her to deal with a ferocious beast charging at her like that.

Yet, I did not worry, for she was not the only one present. A broad-backed man stood beside her, and it was Eli.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit!" he spat out abuse. "If I die, it's all thanks to your Highness," he said without a backward glance. "If I cannot restore my family, it will also be your Highness's fault!"

Bernardo Eli raised his sword.

"If you are lucky, you can defeat him."

Eli's energy suddenly soared.

"It'll be because I'm good," he said, his words playful so he could shake off his anxiety. And with those words, Eli's sword began to cry.

'Woooow~'

Over the keening sound of his sword, his cheery voice rang out.

“The wind stays not on the blade”

“It strikes out in a flurry”

“And storms on like a typhoon”

In the next instant, Eli stretched out his sword, stabbing it out in a piercing thrust. A thundering sound was heard.

‘Kek!’

The lycanthrope, which had been charging with its body hunched, pierced itself on Eli’s blade. The beast roared briefly and then prepared to slash out with its claws. But before it could even slash out, it was pierced a second time.

‘Kscuck!’

‘Qlak,’ the lycanthrope reached out its hand to grab at the sword, but to no avail. Eli had already withdrawn his blade and stabbed into the beast again.

That was the beginning.

Eli’s stabs pierced the beast as an awl pierces leather, again and again.

‘Graar!’ the lycanthrope roared in pain as it fiercely slashed out with its claws. Eli maintained a diagonal stance as he deftly shifted his feet, avoiding all of his foe’s attacks. Whenever he saw a gap, he stabbed his sword through the lycanthrope’s hide.

Sometimes the beast managed to avoid Eli’s thrust, but not many times.

Eli’s swordsmanship was accurate enough. The lycanthrope’s body quickly became bloodied after suffering multiple stab wounds, with its flesh covered in gashes and holes. Upon first glance, many of the wounds looked fatal, having penetrated its vital organs. If the lycanthrope was a knight, it would already have bled to death.

Unfortunately, the beast was far from human. The wounds sealed themselves in no time, and the beast looked as if not a single blade had touched it. New hair even sprouted over the white flesh into which Eli had plunged his sword.

The lycanthrope fiercely growled as it bared its fangs at Eli. Eli thrust out again, and this time his stab was aimed at the thing's heart.

The lycanthrope extended its forearm, and Eli's sword stabbed into it.

"Ah," I sighed.

Eli's swordsmanship was definitely good. His movements were light and agile, and his strikes were economical. He flew like a butterfly and stung like a bee, and the basis of the style was built upon the basics of fencing.

But that was all there was to it – the martial style of the Eli family had already deteriorated.

Indeed, the very kernel of it had succumbed to laxity. The thunderstorm was disrupted, and the power of the poem was so disastrous that the lyrical, flurrying typhoon was without color.

I frowned as I observed this. It was the first time that I saw a more obscene form of Muhunshi, a poem that had lost its edge as the ages passed. I felt sick, and if I felt like this, Eli must be feeling worse.

"Fuck it!" Eli swore as he kicked against the lycanthrope's body, trying to pull his blade free. But the lycanthrope didn't even budge, rather reaching out with its free hand to try and grab Eli, who managed to release his blade at the last moment and bounce away from the beast.

"It's damned strong. Fucking monster."

Eli spewed insults as he retreated, his voice filled with self-destructive tones of regret and despair.

"Is this the sight your Highness wanted to see?" he asked with resentment. Instead of answering, I drew Twilight from my back, then threw it to Eli.

'Chin,' he caught my sword, then shuddered.

"Are you really telling me to fight and die?" His voice sounded like never before, and it was unlike him to speak in such a manner.

It was natural.

He had hoped that he could make his family's martial arts and swordsmanship shine, but the only thing that has been confirmed before both our eyes was that it was a tradition that has been damaged, so much so that its more effective aspects could not be reproduced.

It wasn't strange at all that he had lost his temper.

"If I die in this fight, I die. What do I have to live for, anyway?"

His words were filled with powerlessness and anger, the words of a man who utterly resented himself.

I just listened. And then I talked, wanting to let him know that he had to stop blaming me.

"It is certain that the martial arts of the Eli family are done for. The traditions have been so greatly damaged that it has become impossible to reproduce them."

Eli had been staring at the lycanthrope up till then, never once taking his eyes off it. He now looked at me for the first time in the battle.

"I know! I know! Do say it like that-"

"But that's not all."

Eli growled ferociously at my words. He then said that he couldn't even recite the last verse of the poem, only bring capable of singing a portion of it. He made many excuses like that.

"Do you really think that's all?"

"Ha, I make people miserable to the end."

I shook my head as I heard his suicidal tone of voice.

"The problem is with the Eli family's Muhunshi, not your Muhunshi."

"My family's Muhunshi is mine. My Muhunshi is my family's! What kind of sophistry-

“

“How long will you cling to the traditions and achievements of your ancestors?” I asked Eli, and his face looked as if I had punched him in his back. Looking at him, I continued.

“Muhunshi is not about walking the path that someone else has already walked.”

In a world where karma cannot be accumulated, only traditions have any worth. It wasn’t strange that Eli acted as if his faded family traditions were everything in the world.

But he had to know: The world has changed.

The ancient beings who have disappeared now return, opening a new path to the gaining of transcendence. If he wants to, he can build up his karma in this age.

“A half-man of the full moon is your foe. Don’t you think a pretty good Muhunshi will be born?”

The herald of the full moon before us was enough of a challenge to become the lyrics of a new poem.

Of course, from the very start, he had been unable to summon a gale and wield the power of a typhoon like in the old traditions. But this was the case with all the Muhunshi in the world.

They always begin as [ordinary] or [extraordinary]. Even the [Mythic] dance poems had humbled beginnings before becoming as great as they are now.

The steps Eli take today would be the beginning of his road to reach high places.

“So you’re asking me to make a new dance poem?”

“Why not? You think you can’t? You’ve got nothing to lose by trying, anyway.”

Eli growled at my words.

“What do you see Bernardo Eli as!” he demanded.

There was no resentment anywhere in that ferocious voice. It was just a voice full of bluff, as usual.

A mere while ago, he had been whining that his family's dance poems were now obsolete.

Now Eli straightened himself and focused on the herald of the full moon.

Looking at him, I whispered, "Now that's it, Anne."

{You're still unchanged on the outside and the inside}

Agnes laughed a little, then once more hid the presence of my true body that she had secretly released. The ferocious lycanthrope started moving again.

Eli rushed at the beast. I could no longer sense the feeling of fear and regret that had clung to him like filth a mere while ago.

Honestly, I admired him.

I hadn't expected him to shake off the shame that had ruled his entire life so quickly, just by saying a few words.

{The vessel itself is not bad, although what was contained in it was a vain and hazy regret for a lost past}

I fully sympathized with Anne's words.

Eli's skill has not been obtained simply by holding a sword and swinging it, training and training. He was able to obtain it due to steadily developing his inner discipline since he was a child.

"Surely, this noble is not noble without reason."

Eli had been living in the capital by stuffing his pockets with the gold of idiotic aristocratic rubes. I was never sure whether I should sympathize with the idiots tricked by his business schemes or whether I should sympathize with Eli himself, who had thrown himself into the mud.

Agnes spoke again.

{It seems that your energy has stimulated that annoying guy}

Suddenly, there came a roar that bred terror with its very utterance. It was a roar that contained a greater energy than the cry of any beast I had ever heard.

“Oops, it looks like we have touched a nerve in these half-men.”

{This is not the time to be so easygoing. This one’s energy is so powerful that it can scarcely be contained in a single being}

It was as Agnes said, for in the next moments, a half-man monstrosity as large as an ogre appeared. It was a great silver wolf, its hide as pale as the full moon.

It was a full moon warrior that had sensed the energy of my true body and then came running straight to us.

But the silver-haired lycanthrope was looking in the wrong direction, for as I came to think of it, there was another descendant here of a famous family besides Eli. And her family didn’t merely have famous songs; no, she was a human who has inherited the blood of one of the Five Predecessors.

“Let’s see how deep that blood flows in her veins.”

The golden energy had gradually increased in radiance, and then, suddenly – Adelia’s shoulders stopped shaking.

CHAPTER 153
SEVENTH AND EIGHTH (1)

The fierce battle stopped for a moment, yet the tension had doubled.

It was a lull like the night before a storm.

'Grarr~' the silver-haired lycanthrope bared its fangs.

As it hunched down and stared at Gwain, Trindall, Kampra, and Eli, the men retreated with grunts as the beast growled on. The knights gathered by my side.

Adelia still stood before me, and she had not moved. Naturally, the lycanthrope glared at Adelia while she stood in front of our group. What was contained in that monster's yellow eyeballs was the flashing hunger of a predator about to feast.

'Garrr!'

Even Eli and the three other knights were tense. I could see their bodies stiffen. The lycanthrope was truly ferocious and powerful. However, the meek woman did not retreat even a single step.

On the contrary, she stood firmer as she confronted the fierce energy of the monster.

As I watched Adelia, emotion welled up inside me – she was so bold.

Adelia stood tall as she faced the foe, and this without relying on her traits. I wanted to run to her and praise her. I wanted to say: "Well done, you are brave."

However, I tried my best to swallow the words of praise that had welled up in my throat.

Her determination was too great to deserve a few mere words of praise, and there was much she still had to endure. Now, a woman who despised hurting things wielded a sword by her own will. A timid and meek woman stood facing the murderous half-man.

Praise would be insulting – a comfort, a deceit.

All of Adelia's karma was there because of me. If she hadn't met me, she would never have been in a situation like this.

{If that child never met you, she wouldn't have to suffer such hardship} Agnes said inside my mind.

{Her destiny is not to be led by someone. She must know that it is she who is standing there}

Agnes's voice sounded more like a sigh than a reproach.

{How long on this earth do you plan to carry the karma of others?}

My answer came from my heart.

"I am not a substitute for her karma, yet it is a responsibility I have to bear."

{You've remained unchanged, same back then as you are now} Agnes lamented.

{Poor Gruhorn, a soul who voluntarily played the role of a magic sword. I feel sorry for you}

The way Agnes said this was the same way in which the white night mage spoke to me.

It was a compassion that I could not understand, and it was an unwanted sympathy.

I closed my ears to it, for this was not the time to hear the noble, sympathetic chatter of Agnes.

The silver lycanthrope lowered its head, shook it. I saw Adelia's shoulders become tense.

And immediately after that- 'Gwak!' the lycanthrope hit the ground running, and Adelia jumped aside, meeting its charge. A silver trail of light hovered where the lycanthrope had swung its claws through the air. The attacks that Adelia launched also left shining traceries in the air.

In that dark forest with its lush canopy, a place where sunlight does not properly penetrate, brilliant gold and silver flashes clashed.

'Shhhtrr~' the giant, majestic trees trembled, their leaves scattering.

'Brrkkg!' and in the aftermath of that shock, the ground burst open, and trees toppled.

To avoid injury, the knights and I had to step back for a while.

"Crazy-" Bernardo Eli groaned stupidly.

"If we had stepped back only moments later, we would've died."

"I know, yeah."

I heard Gwain and his comrades converse in bored voices, and their talk did not last long. They quickly focused on the battle between Adelia and the silver half-man.

Adelia was fighting surprisingly well. After every step she took, a heavy strike followed, and the ground burst open. She was reliving the slaying of giants, as the great chasm she ripped into the earth could deal just as well with this lycanthrope as they had dealt with the giant legionaries.

Every time Adelia struck out with her sword, the lycanthrope's flesh fell to the ground in handfuls.

However, the silver half-man was still a tricky foe. It attacked Adelia fiercely, and even though its flesh was being torn from its body, the wounds inflicted quickly healed. The beast was a seasoned warrior. It knew what weapons it had and how to use them.

It used its near-immortal body to attack Adelia aggressively. It always narrowed the gap to prevent Adelia from landing a fatal strike, and it slashed out with hands and legs to prevent her from building up her power.

As time went on, Adelia's breathing was getting irregular.

The tip of her blade trembled, and her steps grew slower and slower.

It seemed that there was doubt in her, uncertainty as to the new, unexpected state she found herself in.

In the end, Adelia couldn't overcome the pressure, struck her sword down with all her might, and stepped back. She looked at me with a sorrowful face.

"No!" shouted Eli. Across Adelia's shoulder, I saw the lycanthrope hunching down and rushing at her.

'Kwadrk, Kwadrk~'

Faced with that fierce charge, it seemed that Adelia would be trampled at once.

Realizing her peril too late, she faced the beast, but as if her progress so far had been but a lie, she could not respond. She just stared blankly at the charging lycanthrope.

'Wooo~' Eli readied his sword and stepped out. Gwain and the other two were ready to charge in. Their willingness to aid a comrade deserved praise, and it was an instinctual, blameless response.

But it was a meaningless reaction.

"No further," I said as I stepped forward. The lycanthrope had come thumping, loping in, but it now crashed to a halt, braking itself with its arms.

Looking at it, I said quietly, "You cannot have her."

The lycanthrope gave a low growl.

The fierce momentum of its charge was no longer in evidence.

"She's mine. This is my knight. She is not an insignificant person to be trampled on."

And I said this I released my hidden presence with all my might.

'Gwoo-ooh-ooh-ooh~'

The karma I had accumulated, the power I had gained, spread all over the place.

My energy had reached the level of the hero and pushed the beasts back. The first

two lycanthropes who had appeared groaned as they lowered themselves. They were like scared dogs, whimpering with their tails between their legs. The silver-haired lycanthrope roared fiercely, but it dared not charge at me; it merely growled.

“Huh, how? You said you had no mana?”

“I said I have no mana. I never said I couldn’t fight.”

“But how can-“

“The Sword Master does not fight with mana alone.”

If the quad-chain knights fight with their swordsmanship alone, then Sword Masters fight with their all. With a sword, only flesh can be torn apart; if the soul is used as a sword, then both the opponent’s body and mind are destroyed.

That was how Sword Masters did battle. And I knew my anger alone was enough to divert the silver lycanthrope from its former intentions. I glanced at Eli, who was still wracked by doubt, then turned straight to Adelia.

The silver-haired half-man retreated a few steps. It was not so long ago that the knights and wizards of the empire could not stop me in that battle where my mana was depleted, and my body became a tattered rag.

Yet, the lycanthrope stepped back, and after looking at him, I looked at Adelia.

“Good job, Adelia.”

At my words, she started to spill the tears that she had held back. It seemed as if all the sadness and fear she had suffered while confronting the mighty beast poured out from her at once.

The courage that had supported her seemed as if but an illusion and her body now trembled.

‘Shn,’ I reached out and supported her by the waist. She cried in my arms.

“Adelia.”

She looked up at me.

“It will be difficult. But since you have started, you should finish it.”

Adelia looked at me with a blank face.

“Do not worry about it. I’ll support you.”

At my words, she wiped away her tears. Then she summoned up the courage that had so quickly deserted her.

Adelia looked at me with a hardened face and then stepped away from me.

She gripped her sword and turned to face the lycanthrope. A brilliant glow quickly rose to the tip of her sword. I stood still and watched her back. Adelia charged across the ground.

Up till then, the silver-haired lycanthrope had been suppressed by my presence. It now lowered its body and staggered forward. Adelia’s assault rained down on the beast’s head.

‘Groaa!’ it roared as it leaped to one side, escaping her attack. Adelia advanced at it, step by step.

Her first step was taken by a light and slender body.

The second step was of a heavier tread, yet still insufficient.

Adelia’s third step dented the ground.

And the earth roared as she took her fourth step.

When her feet touched the ground in that final, fifth step, Adelia was like a tsunami.

“When I cleanse my sword”

Adelia, her sword raised above her head, sang softly. It was a passage from the Bavarian family’s Muhunshi, [Poetry of Sudden Change].

‘Gwoo-ooh-ooh～’ Brilliant rays shone upon her sword. Adelia readied her sword for the strike, the golden light almost reaching out toward the lycanthrope. The beast gave a fierce growled as it readied its claws, looking at Adelia, who had her sword

pointing at it.

“Blood into the river flows”

“And the flesh enriches the earth”

“By a giant’s flesh and blood”

“Shall I form the world anew”

Under my own breath, I recited the final verse that Adelia wasn’t able to voice.

‘Qschazik~’ and in the next instant, Adelia landed a direct hit on the lycanthrope.

‘Graah ahhr ahhr!’ the beast screamed. Its blood pattered to the ground in a light mist. Its right shoulder had been severed, for it had turned its body as Adelia attacked, preventing her from taking its head.

“Tchu,” I clucked my tongue, and the lycanthrope roared fiercely. Its yellow eyeballs stared at me, full of anger. I could see the cowardice in the beast’s eyes, and it almost seemed as if it was blaming me.

“I didn’t do anything. I just watched,” I mused, although I did raise my energy to save Adelia.

‘Aaaarhh!’ the silver beast with the severed shoulder cried. After it had seen so much of its own blood, its former anger and hunger that had been crushed by presence sprang back into life.

It seemed to care little about my presence now; it was solely focused on combat. Its fighting spirit was now once more like that of a true warrior of the full moon that sinks its fangs into the necks of its prey.

But such anger came too late to it.

“Aaah?” a sigh of ecstasy came from behind the beast, and it turned away from me. In front of the half-man, there stood a woman drenched in the spilled blood of the lycanthrope. Different colors flowed through her eyes. There she stood: A meek maniac who had now lost herself to the traits of [Butcher] and [War Mania].

The maniac was grinning and lifted her sword. The auspicious light of the blade did not fit well with that eerie madness that shone in her eyes.

The lycanthrope groaned.

The maniac laughed in reply.

* * *

The battle ended. All that remained was blood and clumps of flesh scattered all over the place, and a woman drenched in blood. Adelia didn't even move.

Usually, she would have shed tears when he saw the carnage that she had wrought, yet now, she stood tall and still. It seemed that she was immersed in deep thoughts.

'Gulp,' I heard someone swallow spit down their dry throats. I knew not whether it had been Eli, Gwain, Kampra, or Trindall. I didn't care – I only looked at Adelia.

She met my gaze with a face that neither smiled nor cried, and she touched her lips.

"I guess-" but before she even finished speaking, 'Fwop!', an intense light burst from her.

I muttered in awe as I saw the radiant glow.

It was at that moment that Adelia tore down the wall that had been blocking her.

CHAPTER 154
SEVENTH AND EIGHTH (2)

The light disappeared as abruptly as it had appeared.

I went to support Adelia, who was staggering and was on the verge of falling.

Adelia looked at me and opened her mouth again and again, for there was a lot she wanted to say, yet she couldn't find the right words to do so.

I grabbed the slender hand that still gripped her sword and led it up. Her hand followed mine, and her sword was raised in front of her face. Adelia looked at me, and I nodded my head in silence. She hesitated for a moment, then fixed her sword before herself in a two-handed grip.

'Wooo~' the sword keened, and a dazzling flash erupted from it. It was compressed qi, so dense that it was far greater than a sword aura: It was an Aura Blade.

"Ah!" Adelia exclaimed.

"I had a hard time and…" Her eyes quickly filled with tears, and she gazed at her Aura Blade and me alternately.

"Congratulations on becoming a Sword Master."

The tears that came from her eyes started creeping down her cheeks. At the same time, the Aura Blade of her sword dissipated. She dropped her sword and looked up at me.

"Well, I… I am…"

She could hardly connect with the reality of it, so brimming was she with emotion.

I patted her head, saying nothing. Adelia had been clinging to my shoulders and breathing so hard that her shoulders heaved, and then, she fell to the ground.

“Are you going to sleep here?” Eli demanded, and Adelia blushed so much that the tips of her ears shone red. She seemed embarrassed, thinking that she looked foolish.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” she apologized to me moments later.

“Tchu,” I clucked my tongue, not satisfied with the atrophy of the moment. I stared at Eli.

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded. I had no reason to congratulate him.

“It’s because my stomach hurts,” complained he, “I struggled, just like her, but I didn’t become a Sword Master. Maybe I can’t. It’s because my stomach hurts and I can’t bear it.”

I was thrilled with his unforeseen honesty.

I have seen the birth of numerous Sword Masters, and I have seen countless military-minded folk who had tried to hide their jealousy and deprivation toward such masters and convey words of false congratulation.

I’m sure none of them would speak like Eli.

“Your stomach hurts,” mused I.

Eli’s reaction to watching the birth of a Sword Master was childish and undignified, so I enjoyed it all the more.

“Honestly, isn’t it right that it should be me after Sir Arwen?” Eli continued his childlike complaints that had no logical basis. “Everyone but me will become Sword Masters.”

I ended up laughing.

* * *

Adelia hadn’t changed much since becoming a Sword Master.

She always hesitated before fighting, and after fighting, she always shed tears. The only thing that differed from before was the fact that her hesitation was not caused by fear. She hesitated out of compassion for her enemy; her tears were sympathy for

the dead.

I did not blame her for being weak.

Her mercy was the same as ruthlessness toward her enemy, for the quick and painless death was the mercy she chose to give them.

The type of completion reached by the meek maniac was so paradoxical, yet at the same time, perfectly harmonious.

Murderousness and madness combined with her traits of innate goodness and sympathy. A bloody berserker in battle, a good and gentle woman in moments of peace.

It was the image of the ideal knight that common folk held in their minds, but of course, the contrast was too dramatic and radical to attain an ideal state.

Regardless, Sword Master is a term describing those who have reached perfection, not a term for those innocents who merely seek it. I was very pleased with the completion of Adelia.

“From today on, let’s practice separately.”

Now that she had crossed the wall of completion, I had to cycle her out of battle. Adelia had to refrain from releasing energy as much as possible, taking all the power in her body and awakening it, making it her own.

“Thank you for your consideration, your Highness.”

Adelia followed my orders without hesitating. So, I left her to her own devices and headed into the forest with Eli, Gwain, and his two comrades.

The days rolled on like crazy. Old trees, half-men: Nothing stood in our way.

The fights were still bloody affairs, and on some days, we fought from dusk till dawn.

The knights developed rapidly. However, it was more of a superficial development. They merely got used to dealing with the monsters in the forest, and the edges of their blades became a fraction sharper.

Their growth was skill-based, physical. They were just like the Knights of the Ring – Mana was extracted from the heart, and that was that. They did not know how to weave new dance poems. Even the scion of the Eli family, a family who had insisted on the use of mana hearts till the very end, remembered only the old traditions. He was rendered illiterate when it came to creating new poems.

“It’s not enough if it’s sharp and fast!”

“Put your will in the sword!”

“Look back at what you did and then at what you’re trying to do!”

I continued to yell in frustration, but the knights didn’t understand my words at all.

“So what the hell do you want from me? Want me to catch a floating cloud?” Eli protested in slight anger.

“Now listen to me. I’ll explain it simply.”

After I confirmed that the knights were fully attentive to my words, I explained to them very slowly, in the most basic manner, what it meant to weave a Muhunshi poem.

“You engrave what you have done on your own into the sword by will. What you have already achieved is called karma, and what you want to achieve in the future is called qi. Isn’t that easy?”

It was a concept that the ancient knights had known before they even wielded swords.

“I know roughly what karma and qi are, but how do you weave it?”

But Eli, Kampra, Gwain, and Trindall did not grasp what I was trying to teach them.

Yet, the latter three were different. I so clearly remembered when the Ekyon brothers had composed the first verse of a poem. The speakers of the poem were not aware of it at the time, of course.

A sigh entered my mind.

{It is a matter of knowing, yet not knowing. They don't have to understand the basic reason}

I agreed with what Agnes was saying.

{The will is qi, and the process of reaching completion of qi is through karma. Please explain it to them again}

Her interrupting me didn't help much.

"What dog shit is that?"

{You don't even try to understand me because you're the same fucker as always! Truly, the same bastard through all the ages! If this was the old days, I would have taught you a lesson myself, I would've wrecked you, you bastard!}

The shouts bursting into my head did little to calm me.

"Four hundred years. Truly a long time, eh Agnes?"

I sighed and then looked at the knights. They had never been stupid men; no, they were quite intelligent.

Eli, as the descendant of a prestigious family, was a brilliantly talented man. And the other three had been carefully selected by the royal family, so a lack of talent was not to blame in their case.

What was as natural as breathing to me and the ancient knights was not so for these four men. Whether gathering mana in the heart or in rings, they were not like the knights I had known in ages past.

I had to admit this to myself.

It wasn't very wise to deny change, to cry out for the old ways and stick blindly to ancient concepts.

Once I admitted my own ignorance and arrogance, I knew where I stood.

"Let's return at once."

We returned to camp; the knights exhausted after fighting monsters all day and by my constant nagging. I entered my tent, my thoughts confused. I tried devising a manner in which I could make them understand karma and qi and engrave it upon their hearts.

My head hurt, but I had to find a way!

Even if you become a Sword Master, it has little meaning if you can't weave dance poems.

I've tried thinking about everything I could do and even went to the Sky Knights who Doris had left behind for our return journey. However, the Knights of the Sky weren't so different from my knights. They had also inherited some of the ancient traditions, and they merely used them instead of improving upon them.

Doris or his father, the king – the scions of the Sky Knight – might have known the answer, but they weren't here. And I wasn't sure if they would tell me the answer if they knew it.

In the end, the matter rested in my hands. I wrapped my head around it again.

In the meantime, Eli and the others continued their training as they wandered through the forest.

Four days passed without success.

Bernardo Eli still hadn't crossed the wall or figured out how to weave poems. There was nothing much to say about Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra.

I was forced to focus on my own development, for my heart had become harder after it had been so weakened. It is only if you are careful that you can fill an empty bowl.

I absorbed mana without delay. In less than half a day, my mana heart was filled.

It was time to make a decision.

I had hoped to make Bernardo Eli a Sword Master as well and let him grasp Muhunshi so that he could weave an entire song of the full-moon race, but I could no longer wait, for there were no promising developments.

Eventually, I decided that we had to return to Leonberg and leave things as they were.

The night when I was about to inform everyone of my decision, Gwain came into my barrack, greatly excited.

“Okay! I understand it a bit now!”

Gwain was so excited that he forgot of his uncomfortable relationship with me.

“Now, look here-” Gwain drew his sword, then started to shout out loud, as if he was an actor upon a stage.

“I am broken, my light is lost”

“So I shall follow as a sword in the dark”

The words that came from his mouth were as crude and tacky as the ‘Song of the Sword’ sung by the Silver Fox mercenaries. But what it contained was Gwain’s strong will.

‘Sooah～’ a wave of energy spread out, and Gwain’s blade turned black. Not in a sinister manner, it was merely a dark black blade. It was as if it had become a shadow.

Gwain swung his blackened sword. There was no sword aura, and there was no sound. Gwain’s strike silently cleaved through the air.

Even though the rhyme was crude and the words grim, it was still a dance poem.

“Did you see it? Have you seen it?”

Gwain laughed, and I gave him a thumbs-up. We shared a smile, and then it became awkward for a moment. We stopped laughing at the same time.

“Hggm,” Gwain then coughed, marshaling his excitement.

I asked him what the name of his poem was, and he hesitated for a moment before saying, “I named it Poetry of Shadows.”

It was a pretty good name.

* * *

After Gwain had done it, his comrades also wove Muhunshi, one after the other.

The three of them had composed: [The Poetry of Shadows], [The Poetry of the Old Day], and [The Poetry of the Night]. All three poems weren't even [Extraordinary], and were composed with the use of dark and gloomy words.

This was because these men's past was marked by despair and frustration, and also because, even if they hungered for the sun, they were not yet ready to go outside on their own.

I ignored our bad relationship, congratulated them, and encouraged them selflessly from that moment on.

"So… How did you weave them?" Eli asked after hesitating for a while upon seeing the three knight's dance poems in action. They said that they realized how to do it by reflecting on their past.

"That's what we did. After all, you don't have to know how to weave. You just do it."

"No, I understand. There is no way to explain it," Bernard Eli said with a frown.

He seemed disappointed, having expected more of an answer. I was wondering how the knights of this era would come to form their poems through karma and qi.

* * *

That evening, Eli went into the forest and did not return. I knew why he went.

Adelia had become a Sword Master, and Gwain's troupe had each succeeded in weaving their dance poems.

Eli couldn't stand the fact that he alone had failed.

Still, in case of misfortune, I set out to find him with Gunn.

It wasn't difficult to find Eli, for he was fighting monsters solo on the edge of the

forest.

His whole body was full of wounds, but fortunately, none of them were made by a lycanthrope. We hid in the darkness as we watched Bernardo Eli fight.

“My sword is like a flurry! I am the early wind!

“The city has fallen, its glory taken! I will recover all I have lost!

“I cut the head of the wolf and offer it to the full moon!”

Eli was constantly speaking like a madman.

“Fuck it! Why not!?”

Perhaps Eli had been shouting for a long time before I came, for his voice had cracked to the utmost point of hoarseness.

“Why can’t it be me!? Why the hell is this so difficult?”

I could watch no more and made to leave, but suddenly felt a familiar energy from the opposite direction.

It was Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra.

They were hiding in some bushes, unaware that I was watching as well. Their heads stuck out above the thicket as they watched Eli. Even if they had exchanged strong words with him in the past, they had still followed Eli to the forest in the middle of the night, watching over him like a friend.

I quietly returned to camp.

* * *

Bernardo Eli did not return the next day, nor the next. From time to time, I headed out to confirm that he was safe. And upon the fourth day, Eli finally made his return.

“Wake up! Come out!”

He arrived in the middle of the knight and woke up Gwain’s troupe. Eli was a sore

sight: His eyes were red and his body bloody, with all the scratches and wounds upon it making him look as if he had jumped into a pool of broken glass.

Nevertheless, Eli was laughing.

'Shick,' he drew his sword, and a brilliant, blazing flash erupted from it.

It was definitely an Aura Blade. And upon that night, the eighth champion of Leonberger was born.

"That's not all," said he before anyone could even congratulate him.

Bernardo Eli began reciting his poem with a voice that rang out sharp.

{We're stockpiling!}

CHAPTER 155
SEVENTH AND EIGHTH (3)

“In the dark, moonlit night”

“Rust upon my sword shined blue”

‘Krcchk,’ the sword keened as if scraping across iron.

“Under a pale moon do I scrape away the rust,

“And sharpen my sword for when the wolf howls”

The hue of the brilliant Aura Blade looked like the soft moonlight. Bernardo Eli continued to stare at me. He quietly studied the light, before nodding and swinging his sword with vigor.

‘Wssska~’ an arc of light like a crescent moon shined in the air, and he sliced vertically, his Aura Blade cleaving the air.

“How is it, my poetry?” Eli asked me as he sheathed his sword. Instead of answering, I looked at my hand. A strange chill had settled into my palm. I closed my eyes and tasted the energy of muhunshi. I tasted the energy of a descendant of a fallen family and his extraordinary will to overcome the hurt that had been handed down from heart to heart.

“I tried to express the scene of a family that was going to fall due to the use of mana rings with the expressions of dark night and the rusty sword. By mentioning the moon after that, my poem talks of there being light at the end of the deepest darkness. In other words, my poem can be seen as an allegory for the deep night and the coming dawn.”

I never asked Eli to explain the meaning of the poem to me – I just wanted to taste the spirit of it a little more.

“Tchu,” I clucked my tongue and clenched my fist. The chill that had hovered in my

palm faded away.

“The pale moon symbolizes the moon I had seen in the forest, and the scraping off of rust is a metaphor referencing the fact that I had finally broken through the wall of becoming a Sword Master. Also, the wolf howling represents the fact that I have found a new path in my battles with the monsters.”

Bernardo Eli was talking about his dance poem. This was the first time I had heard someone interpreting dance poems in such a manner, and it was absurd.

As I stared at him, Eli talked even more excitedly.

“How did I compose my muhunshi, you ask? While wandering through the forest, I suddenly chanced to look at the sky. It was the same sky we see from Leonberg, equally dark and deep. So, I suddenly thought of something that I had pondered on before. Naturally, I-“

“Stop.”

“…recalled the life I have lived, all the tough times and tribulation that have beset-“

“Stop!” I shouted. If I left him like this, he would be talking about his sad, sloppy past until the night passed into day. Eli looked at me with a gloomy face, and his gaze held resentment.

“Okay, so tell me the name of the poem,” I asked, ignoring his look.

“I haven’t named it yet,” came his clear answer.

I was amazed. Here he was, running into camp straight away and waking up Gwain’s troupe in the middle of the night to tell them of his woven dance poem. And he hasn’t even named it yet.

“I am… Well… No.”

I wondered why he was hesitating when he suddenly suggested, “I don’t think it’s bad if you name it.”

It was surprising, as I had thought he would be making up a big name right on the spot, for he loved the sound of his own voice. I did not turn down the offer.

Some of the dance poems have indeed been named by someone other than their composer, and many of them became [Heroic]. I hoped that Eli's poem would also reach that level.

"Don't you want to name it?" asked I.

"No," replied he.

There was a name that came to mind.

"I name it the [Poem of the Full Moon]."

The night was empty, gloomy, and Eli was staring up at the crescent moon.

I was hoping that the sickle moon he had in his heart would escape its prison and at long last become a full moon.

"Ah!" Eli exclaimed. "The full moon…"

Over and over again, he thought about the name I had given him.

"That's a romantic name," he said with a laugh after a while, and he was pleased.

"Congratulations, Eli."

"So let's get some sleep," Eli responded, his face proud, and he sketched a bow.

* * *

Eli went in and out of the forest to refine the verse of his poem. Having risen to the level of Sword Master, I knew that we had no reason to worry about him. So, I let him wander the forest for a few days.

Berg Berten informed me of the war, saying that the imperial army has begun to withdraw from the forest after they suffered so greatly from the monsters. The front had shifted to the South Sea.

Berg told me tales I could hardly believe, such as the fact that the Sky Knights were unable to prevent the landing of the imperial armada. I didn't understand – Battleships floating upon the great sea were surely easy targets for the Wyvern

Knights.

The imperial fleet should have been helpless if the Sky Knights carried wizards with them to pour magic from the skies. I learned that the Sky Knights had, in fact, attempted a bombing run by employing wizards.

And it failed.

“The power of the imperial wizards is tremendous.”

It wasn’t just that they were powerful, but that their response to the wyverns has been well-organized. Berg spoke on.

“As I have it, the imperial navy formed a single unit of wizards. Without doing so, they could surely not have formed such a systematic response to the Wyvern Knights.”

I had never before encountered such a thing. Wizards were rarely formed into such combined squads, as, if the squad was to be wiped out, the loss would be considerable.

Spreading your wizards out is common sense in war.

“The people on the southern front report that the entire unit has been named the Imperial Wizards.”

It seemed that the emperor had overturned that common sense, for he was a wizard and a knight. He could think like both and had the power of an entire empire at his disposal.

“The empire’s fleet lost only six of its two-hundred warships, and now it’s up to our southern forces to stop them,” Berg said as he stared at me.

His eyes seemed to be telling me: “The war is now in the south, not the west, so don’t hesitate to leave.”

Obviously, my work in Dotrin was over.

The world has changed, and in that changed world, the borders between Burgundy and Dotrin have also been drawn. The forest has now become a realm where the full-

moon race, demon trees, and countless other monsters live. If the empire wished to invade Dotrin by land, they would have to cross through the forest.

It was no easy task, and the monsters now guarded Dotrin's borders.

Still, the situation was not wholly in favor of Dotrin, for all those areas of forest were now lost to the kingdom. Even though the monsters still stopped the imperial advance, the loss was painful.

And just as the Imperial Army could only now enter Dotrin by sea, so Dotrin could only access the continent by taking sea routes. But that was something for the king and nobles of Dotrin to worry about, not me.

All I could do was wish Dotrin the best of luck.

"It looks like you're leaving right away."

"Yes, because I have nothing more to do here."

Berg straightened as he heard this.

"The Berten family will never forget your devotion and sacrifice to Dotrin, Prince of Leonberg. I hope that your kingdom will be reborn as a beacon in the north."

"I, as Adrian Leonberger, hopes that Dotrin will finally win this war. I also hope that Berg Berten and his knights will always remain in good health."

Berg reached out to me, and when we clasped hands, he gave me a deep look. As I met his gaze, I added, "Gold is heavy and bulky. Yes… It should be gems."

I had to collect my payment for fighting for Dotrin.

* * *

Berg Berten sent one of his old knights to fetch some gems from his estate. While I awaited my salary, the mages and wizards of Dotrin arrived. They did not stay in the camp for long, as they only left one mage in the camp, all of them then heading for the southern front.

As they came and went, Berg's old knight returned.

“Here you are,” Berg said as he paid me up front, and I handed the bag to Eli, who looked through the bag of gems meticulously to gauge their value. While he did this, I bid farewell to the elderly knights.

“I hope there is only luck.”

“It was an honor to do battle at your side.”

“May the day come when we can repay your good faith.”

“Unless we get old and die first.”

While the old knights chatted with me and said their goodbyes, Eli finished studying our paycheck and nodded to me. I gave a last, proper look at the military camp.

Even if this wasn’t my kingdom, I was leaving Dotrin after being here for near on a year.

I felt like a new man.

I engraved the faces of all these good men into my memory and mounted the waiting wyvern.

“But are you really going to leave us like this? Even if you don’t reveal your identity, you are still the hero of the forest. Why not leave with a grand farewell ceremony?”

“No dice. I like to be sneaky.”

Berg nodded at my words, saying he knew what I meant.

“Well then, onward and upwards,” I said to the Wyvern Knight, nodding.

“Stay back!” the knight ordered Berg Berten and his elderly knights.

The wyvern beat its wings and flew skyward. Instead of flying away at once, the knight brought his mount into a low glide, and we circled the camp.

As Dotrin’s soldiers and knights saw the wyvern, they ceased their tasks and waved at us.

Some of them screamed at the top of their lungs that we had to come back soon and safe, making the assumption that we were going off on a mission. Others shouted their goodbyes and wished us the best of luck.

“That’s enough.”

Upon my order, the Sky Knight yanked on the reins.

‘Kyeaah aah!’ the wyvern cried and soared higher, ever higher.

Over the sounds of its great wings flapping, I could hear Dotrin’s knight’s crying out: “May the reputation of the Veil Mercenaries spread across the continent.”

“Veil Mercenary Commander Ian, we wish you luck!”

So many of them shouted that none had to shout with mana.

And that was how I left the camp.

* * *

Instead of flying straight to Leonberg, the wyvern flew to the royal castle of Dotrin.

It was there that I reunited with the King of Dotrin to discuss the changes in the world and our continued mutual cooperation. One king and one prince – I wasn’t a king, but he cared little.

He swore to me that when the day came for Leonberg to rise up against the empire, Dotrin would be with us. On my account, I promised to aid Dotrin with all my heart and all my might in the coming times of tribulation.

We didn’t need to sign treaties or melt wax. It was enough for us to make an oath with the bond of our word.

The king and I made such promises, and then we parted. The wyvern bore me to Leonberg.

We flew north and further north, the wyvern going ever on.

The hot climate quickly cooled, and that cold peculiar to the north of the continent

pierced my lungs as I inhaled with all my might.

The territory of Leonberg was spread out below – so unlike the verdant land of Dotrin, these were desolate regions. Only as I saw the snow-covered and barren land below did I truly realize that I had returned.

By night, the capital began to appear in the distance.

“The Eli family’s Bernardo has finally returned – as a Sword Master!” Eli shouted several times in a thrilled voice. Normally I would have chided him, saying that he was being noisy, but this time I decided to let him shout his heart out.

Meanwhile, the wyvern gained the capital and began descending. We touched down on a secluded field some distance from the capital.

“Are you heading straight to the southern front?” I asked the knight.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I hope things go well there.”

“And I hope fate will be with you. You have worked hard for us.”

After our brief goodbye, the Knight of the Sky took to the air once more upon his wyvern.

I gazed up and then turned away.

“Let’s go.”

I began walking to the distant gate of the capital, with the seventh and eight champions of the kingdom following me.

CHAPTER 156
FINALLY RETURNED (1)

Arwen Kirgayen went outside after her year-long ring-forming, and she was evident;y not in a pleasant mood.

“Why! Why didn’t you tell me in advance?!”

Arwen’s emotions were rarely shaken, and especially after reaching completion, she showed little anger.

“I had to do it.”

While she was resting in her family’s castle, the first prince had already left for the battlefield. And he was headed right into the middle of the war between the Dotrin Kingdom and Burgundy Empire with only one half-elf and five knights by his side.

“What if I had told you? You would have given up your chance at completion and run off to war.”

Her father said that everything he had done, he had done for her.

“His Highness did not want such a fate for you.”

He also said it was the will of the prince. Arwen could no longer fault his actions, in fact, she knew he was right. It was just a pity, for someone had to be with the first prince. Someone had to stop him from doing reckless things. Someone had to take the burden from his shoulders and stand by his side, so he did not struggle on the battlefield.

“Please tell me all that happened.”

Arwen tried hard to control her heart as she listened to her father’s story.

Her expression remained calm throughout the recounting, yet things were not that way inside of her.

When she heard how the first prince had been found severely wounded after leaving a letter that was almost a will, it felt as if her heart had collapsed.

“The half-elves who followed him as escorts were annihilated. Only Gunn survived, but her wounds were also grave.”

Even if it was over, Arwen felt the sorrow of it all.

The prince must have blamed himself for the deaths of the half-elves, just like the time when he had believed that all the deaths at Winter Castle were his fault. Just like when he was sick inside without shedding a single tear after his uncle’s death.

He must have pretended to be okay, all the while suffering without anyone’s knowledge. Arwen cared little for the wounds that had been inflicted on his body – the true damage came from the emotions that he must have felt in his heart.

“Fortunately, there was no lasting damage to him that you need to be concerned about. His Highness headed straight to the domed kingdom after his terrifyingly swift recovery,” Siorin continued his account.

He told her of the war between Dotrin and the empire and of the battles the young prince fought in, and how they ended. It had all happened in distant lands, so he only had the vague outlines of what had occurred.

The stories that had come to Leonberg did not mention the first prince.

There was only the name of Ian, the commander of the Veil Mercenary Company. Even that name was mentioned in vague terms, basically: “He did a good job, he made a big mess.”

But Arwen knew: The tales of the mercenary were painted so vividly that she knew it was the prince who had fought those battles. He must have been on the frontlines, and he must have pushed himself and hurt himself to a great extent. The prince she knew wasn’t one that took proper care of his body.

Her father’s tales were over, and he stood from his seat.

“I will leave,” said Arwen, and her father’s face became dry in a second.

“Go to Dotrin on your own? To do what?”

“I’m not going to Dotrin,” said Arwen, “I will go to Winter Castle.”

Not long ago, there had been a phenomenon far too ominous to be called an eclipse. The darkness quickly cleared, but the ill portent of it remained in her heart like sediment upon the floor of the ocean.

Something will happen in the world, or it has already happened. And if something is going to happen in Leonberg, it will surely begin at Winter Castle.

Arwen was sure of this, and Siorin didn’t stop her.

“In this year, the atmosphere in the mountains beyond the castle has been unfavorable. It is said that Count Balahard has issued a decree to the northern lords, by his authority as Shield of the North. They are to prepare for war, and you will surely be of great aid to them.”

Siorin said that it would be easier for the first prince to handle the affairs of the north, were his greatest supporter there to remain alive. He went on to say that he would lend Arwen some of the family’s troops.

Arwen, however, wasn’t going to Winter Castle for political reasons. Instead, when the first prince returned, she didn’t want him to see her mourning.

So, Arwen led fifty of her family’s cavalrymen north. And when she reached the north, events at Winter Castle were already in full swing.

‘Bawooowoo!’ the horn constantly rang out.

“Fire! Fire!”

So too came the sounds of archers loosing volleys. Those at Winter Castle were fighting fiercely as if the war against the Warlord was replaying itself.

‘Doof! Doof!’ and there was another, unfamiliar sound that Arwen heard from time to time.

As she arrived, she was immediately guided to Count Balahard. Vincent was on the wall, as always.

“I heard the news. You became a champion, right? It’s a bit late, but congratulations.”

Vincent looked fatigued, yet he still greeted her with bright eyes.

“The situation doesn’t look very good,” observed Arwen.

“Well, is it ever? There are so many monsters, and I’m having a hard time. Quick, cover your ears,” Vincent suddenly said as he stuck his fingers into his ears.

“Cheolpo!” Arwen heard a ranger shout in the next instant.

‘Doof! Doof!,’ and the roar she had heard when approaching the south gate rang out once more. Arwen was dizzied for a moment as the great roar deafened her.

“…!?” Vincent said something to her.

‘Peee eee eee,’ all she heard was the ringing in her ears. Vincent raised his finger and pointed to a spot under the wall. The corpses of monsters were scattered about, with arrows stuck in them. And on the wall itself, she saw a strange cylinder of iron, a thing she had never seen before. It was spewing smoke. The rangers next to it groaned as they pushed a large iron ball into the great hole on the elevated end of the iron.

As soon as Arwen saw this strange device, she remembered how much the prince had praised the weapons of a certain race, so much so that his mouth had begun to hurt from all the talk.

“Dwarves’ iron cannon!”

Yes, that was what it was called. Arwen rotated a single mana ring to relieve herself from the roar of the cannon. Then, she looked over the wall.

The carcasses of monsters had been crushed by the iron balls which had been fired from the cannons. The ensuing explosion had also shredded their bodies. And beyond that, many living monsters were seen. From right under the wall to the other side of the snowfield, the land was so packed with monsters that it was surely hard for the things to take a single step.

Even in that one glance, their numbers seemed to be thousands and thousands.

There was also a great variety of them – In the bipedal class, there were orcs, goblins, kobolds, ogres, trolls, and other beings she knew well. The quadrupeds consisted of

owlbears and many other types of beasts unknown to Arwen.

“How long has it been?” asked Arwen.

“It’s been about a month now,” came Vincent’s reply.

Arwen frowned. It could not be a coincidence, she decided, for exactly a month ago, the sinister eclipse occurred.

“Since that day, the monsters have been going crazy,” Vincent said, thinking along the same lines as Arwen.

“The big ones don’t eat the little ones, and the little ones aren’t afraid of the big ones. Do you know what that means?” asked Vincent.

“Either fear is dominating them down to their marrow, or someone is controlling them,” Arwen replied in a stern voice. “Or maybe both.”

She again looked below the wall.

An Ogre and a troll stood shoulder-to-shoulder and were madly bashing against the gates.

‘Dwang! Dwang!’ the gates reverberated as the large monsters slammed their fists into them.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be hard for them to break through gates reinforced by the dwarves,” Vincent said in an embarrassed tone.

“Fortunately, our supplies are sufficient. Arrows have been the top priority, and our supplies have been steadily stocked up. The dwarves regularly deliver cannonballs to us.”

It was as Vincent said: The soldiers of Winter Castle were keeping the monsters at bay surprisingly well.

Arwen had thought they would be faring worse after so many veteran soldiers were killed in the last war and after the knights were near-annihilated.

However, despite their successes, the mood in Winter Castle was still grim.

“I think this is only the beginning.”

Vincent went on to say that he could not let go of the belief that even this great number of monsters was merely a sign of something worse yet to come. Arwen sympathized with the idea.

“We must get some rest. I think the time will soon come when you will need our blades,” said Arwen. Once she was done talking with Vincent, she and the Kirgayen cavalry did rest, but not for long.

‘Buwooo wooo wooo!’ an urgent horn sounded, and Arwen headed straight for the wall.

“Harpies!”

“Damn! There are griffons, too!”

She heard the terrified shouts of rangers as she climbed the wall.

“Form up ranks! Notch arrows and stand at the ready!”

“Fire upon my order!”

“What of the climbers?”

“Ignore them! The knights will care of it!”

As the rangers shouted, Arwen looked at the sky.

Hundreds of black dots headed straight for Winter Castle, and as she channeled mana to her eyes, their shapes were revealed.

They were women with the black wings of birds, with their legs ending in talons. There were also dozens of monsters with eagle-like heads and wings and the bodies of lions.

“Can you kill them?” Arwen asked Vincent.

“We must kill them,” he replied, his face stern.

He grasped a northern bow instead of a sword.

“Here they come!”

“Ready- Fire!”

When the winged monsters were almost upon Winter Castle, the ranger commanders shouted their orders, and the next instant, a thousand arrows were fired into the air.

‘Kreea-ee-eek!’ the harpies pierced by arrows plummeted to the earth.

However, not many of them fell. Most of the harpies had acrobatically avoided the arrows. Those harpies who could not dodge hid themselves behind the bulks of the griffons.

The griffons themselves weren’t slain by the arrows.

“Fire without pause!”

After the rangers quickly notched their next arrows, they fired again.

But the results were poor – this was the moment where the rangers’ inexperience showed. Veteran rangers would never have missed targets several times as large as birds.

‘Fsccccka!’ a black trajectory soared through the air with a crackling sound.

‘Keaaaheek!’ a griffon roared as this black thing pierced into it, sending it crashing to the ground.

“What a wonder!”

The rangers cheered, and they all stared at a woman who was wielding an unusually large longbow. Arwen remembered her. When recruitment had been in full swing, a man and woman came to Winter Castle. The first prince suborned the man to the Black Lancers, and the woman went into the mountains with the rangers.

The man’s name was Gallahan, and the woman…

“Sir Boris! Target the griffons first!”

She was called Boris.

“I was lucky! Even with luck in the future, I can only get up to five! The remaining thirty have to be taken care of!” Boris answered sharply, then shot another griffon, dropping it.

In the meantime, the rangers were diligent as they fired arrows at the harpies, but their volleys were still lacking in efficacy. The harpies remained in their hundreds.

“Damn! Prepare for bombardment!”

The harpies, at last, reached the airspace over Winter Castle after flying through the rangers’ volleys. They dropped the stones that they had been carrying in their talons, and even if Arwen was a quad-chain knight, she would never be able to stop all the stones that dropped from the sky.

She guessed that she would be able to block them in a thirty-foot radius, at best. Still, Arwen vowed to give it her all.

Energy gathered upon the edge of her blade, and just when she was about to shatter the falling stones, a strange energy spread over the wall.

‘Dook! Dook!’ A translucent membrane had covered the wall, and the rocks dropped by the harpies bounced off it.

“Hail the wizards of the White Night Tower!” Arwen heard, and she looked to one corner of the wall.

There were dozens of people wearing robes, and that they were the wizards of the new tower was obvious.

Arwen frowned, for she knew that they had not received enough training to be participating in battles.

In fact, she saw that a few of them were so exhausted that they had sunk to the floor after just a single use of their magic.

But their efforts had been adequate.

Still, each harpy had two talons, and therefore two rocks – and they still had to drop their second salvo.

The coming bombardment would be worse than the first.

Just then, Count Balahard ordered, “Knights! Sword auras!”

And in the next moment, the sound of keening blades rang countless times across the wall.

“Ah?” Arwen gasped in surprise.

There were great flashes of light on the wall, and each one was a shining sword aura.

The knights held their blades at the ready, and as the rocks plummeted earthward, they were met by blazing swords. Arwen stared at the scene blankly. The seeds the young prince had sown before leaving have sprouted and already grown this much.

The beauty of it overwhelmed Arwen’s heart.

CHAPTER 157
FINALLY RETURNED (2)

Swords slashed, and the stones were shattered.

“You idiots! You’re just staring blankly! Fire! Shoot some of them!” Jordan shouted, some of the powdered stone having entered his mouth.

‘Spcha,’ he spat it out and strode forward to kick a ranger’s ass.

“Do something with your hands, man!”

The motivated rangers clutched their bows and aimed at the sky.

“Fuck! What job do I get after being promoted? I’m doing the same fucking thing!”

Jordan had been promoted from Ranger Platoon Leader to Ranger Company Commander, but the work did not differ much: He had to kick the arses of the rangers serving under him.

The only difference was that he now had to kick two-hundred asses, up from ten.

“They promoted me to do this!? I wanted to be pampered like a cow!” While Jordan complained about his new job description, he continued to push the rangers.

Knights had prevented the bombardment, but they could not kill the harpies. In the end, the harpies had to be dealt with by the rangers.

However, their kill ratio was slow.

“Fucking new recruits! Two winters have passed, and none of you have improved!”

They had quite a bit of experience, enough to not be called recruits, but in Jordan’s eyes, they were still young chicks. If they had been veteran rangers, they would’ve wiped out the harpies before they had even approached.

But what could Jordan do?

Very few of the veterans had survived, and they had all become commanders. Heavy curse words rang all across the walls.

“At least they know my heart!” As Jordan thought about the fact that the platoon leaders were also struggling with the foolish recruits, he felt a bit better.

But that relief only lasted a while, only until he opened his eyes.

‘Kree~ kree~ kree~’ Jordan watched how a harpy, which had dropped her stone, swooped down and picked up an orc.

“Incoming!” Jordan immediately divined the harpies’ intentions. They have decided that, since rocks were hard to come by on the snowfield, monsters would serve their purposes just fine. It was a rapid change of tactic, such a phenomenal, wonderful improvisation – If the Jordan wasn’t to be the target of it, he would’ve applauded the harpies heartily.

“Here it comes!”

An orc fell from the sky. Jordan had no need to draw his sword; he didn’t even have to consider it.

‘Pluch!’ the orc could not overcome the workings of gravity and became a lump of twisted flesh as it slammed into the wall.

Similar scenes were playing out all over. Countless monsters were dropped by the harpies and fell to the walls.

Most were killed by the swords of knights before they even thudded into the wall. Luckily, those not killed by the knights became broken sacks of meat due to their innate lack of wings.

The harpies were little bothered by whether the monsters lived or died – they constantly kept on snatching monsters up and throwing them to the walls.

Some did survive, and these were the large monsters dropped by the griffons.

“Target them!” Jordan exclaimed urgently.

Most of the monsters quickly died, yet the arrows fired by the rangers could do little against the griffons. Jordan knew that if one of the large monsters crashed into him, his corpse would not be in a recognizable shape.

“I hate these fucking recruits!” Jordan swore as he ran toward a recruit.

‘Blach!’ the monster fell, just after Jordan had tackled the ranger from under its flight path.

Jordan stood as he drew his sword, seeing the vicious monster shake its head, a monster called the King of the Mountain.

Even with luck, there wasn’t much he could do against this beast.

“Uh… Uh…”

Some rangers groaned as they took in the menace of the ogre, while others simply looked at the beast blankly as if their souls had gone out of their bodies.

The knights could not deal with the ogre, instead having to contend with a heap of trolls that had been dropped in the distance.

Jordan looked at the ogre once more.

One of the beast’s shoulders had collapsed after its fall, and it was shaking its head, still unable to get a good sense of what and where it was. It didn’t seem long before the beast would snap awake.

“Ha, these recruits won’t do a thing,” Jordan muttered with some regret and fixed his sword.

There was a tragic cast to his expression, yet no fear was seen. This was nothing special for Jordan, and he now his time had come.

Jordan rushed at the ogre.

He didn’t even care to stab into the beast. All he wanted to do was crash into it and let it topple from the wall. That would be enough. They could clean his corpse up later.

Jordan ran as hard as he could and slammed into the ogre.

'Thud!'

The ogre staggered – very, very little.

"Hey pal, it's not what you think it is," Jordan said with a friendly face as he looked at the ogre. An eerie light shone in the beast's eyes. In the brief moment that the ogre hesitated, Jordan could sense its murderous intent. The ogre reached out its hand, a hand that could pulp a man's head with a single squeeze.

Jordan's eyes widened as something suddenly flew at the ogre.

'Dwak!'

The ogre stumbled back, taking a step toward the edge of the wall.

"Don't pretend to be a hero alone!" Jordan's eyes were now very wide, for he saw rangers holding shields and pushing against the ogre. They were all veterans.

"What are you doing!"

"When we saw you charge it like a mad fella, we had to help. This thing is strong!"

"You with us?"

Jordan snapped awake as he heard such insane talk and cried, "Why are you here!? What about your platoons!?"

"I know my boys are fighting well! Unlike you, I am a very capable commander.

"Hey now. stop taking, and let's all push together!"

Jordan hastily lent his strength to that of the veterans.

'Thsud!' the ogre now staggered back and had been driven to the very edge of the wall. With just a single step more, the rangers would be able to make it drop.

They almost did it.

‘Groor!’ in the next moment, the ogre snapped awake.

‘Quap,’ the ogre grabbed onto an iron shield, and it crumbled like a sheet of paper. The ranger, his arm buckled into the shield, was lifted into the air.

“Oh, I knew it wouldn’t work! Rushing at a mighty ogre- Does that make any sense?” cried one veteran.

“I’ll be the first one to die, lads! You don’t have to follow me too early, so be sure to-” and the ranger, with a defeated voice, his arm stuck in the shield, said no more as the ogre threw him off the wall.

“You bald fucking bastard!” Jordan shouted as he jumped into the air and clung to the ogre. In an instant, he had climbed to the beast’s shoulder, the one which had been crushed in the impact, and started stabbing into it with his dagger. Such a weak dagger would normally not be able to scratch the thing, but Jordan skillfully stabbed into its existing wounds.

‘Grar!’ the ogre roared, more in anger than in pain.

“Die! Die!” cried Jordan as she stabbed into the ogre without pause.

‘Shrk~ Shrk~’ the dagger cut against one of the ogre’s bones, and it began roaring like crazy. Unable to overcome the fierce hand of the ogre swiping over its head, Jordan was thrown to the battlements.

‘Grrra~’ the ogre gave a low growl. It was no longer an ogre dizzied by the fall; now, it was a true, hungry ogre. Jordan saw the knights who had dealt with the trolls come running from afar. Now, it was time to get out – but Jordan could not stand. He sank to the floor, and it felt as if his leg had broken.

“Flee! Quickly!” a man shouted at Jordan.

“I want to, guys. But I can’t,” Jordan muttered as he stared at the ogre, which was approaching him with a vicious smile.

Jordan gave a small whimper, for he had always wanted a beautiful death – now he wouldn’t even leave a body behind. Jordan wished he rather tried pushing an orc from the wall – they say that those who die fighting an ogre can’t act like veterans when it crunches on their bones.

Jordan prepared himself for the coming pain, clenching his teeth – but no matter how long he waited for it, there was no pain. Jordan looked at the ogre, and the thing had stiffened, stopped moving.

Its mouth was agape, and blood trickled from its vicious snout. A faint red line appeared on its neck. The line gradually thickened, and then blood fountained from it.

'Duk,' the ogre's head fell, and only then could Jordan see who had stepped in front of the beast. A knight in a suit of iron armor which had the symbol of a golden, crouching lion on its breastplate, and the heads of silver lions engraved upon each pauldron.

Both symbols were familiar to Jordan: The golden lion was allowed to be worn only by knights of the royal family, while the silver head of a lion could only be engraved upon the shoulder of a knight who has reached the highest level.

And Jordan knew of a knight who had could wear both those symbols.

"Sir Arwen?"

It was the prince's knight, Arwen Kirgayen.

Arwen lifted the visor of her helm, and the radiant glow that shined from the edge of her sword embraced her like a halo.

"I pay homage to your brave fight," said Arwen in a clear voice that ill-matched the noise of the battlefield, with its cursed and bloody screams.

Arwen lowered her visor once more and started running along the walls.

"For his Highness, the prince!" Arwen's roar echoed in all directions.

"For Winter Castle!" the knights battling monsters upon the walls suddenly shouted along with her.

Morale soared, and the momentum of the monsters was broken.

'Doof!' and the iron cannons began to breathe fire once more.

“The monsters are falling back!”

The monsters that had been swarming beneath the walls were retreating as they started running towards the mountains. The hordes of and griffons that had gathered in their black swarms also disappeared.

“We won!”

“Victory is ours!”

Rangers and knights cheered, and Jordan looked at them with gloom in his eyes.

“I am still alive,” said he, not in joy or in relief but in a dry voice.

Jordan straightened his shoulders, and the movement tired him as if he was carrying a heavy load.

“Commander,” one of the rangers came to Jordan, and he struck the man across the back of his head.

“Are you crazy, man?” Jordan shouted. “Leaving me to risk my life like that!”

“It’s insane to go pushing an ogre with your body, commander,” complained the ranger.

“Maybe it would be for the best,” said Jordan with a grim face after thinking for a while. “Then I can really die. There are only three of us left from the 17th platoon, and you put all of us old guys together, we’re less than thirty,” Jordan continued, his face deadly serious, which was rare for him. “Ah, but don’t worry! I’m not dying until I make you bloodsacks real ranges of Winter Castle, in honor of those who have come before you.”

“It’s funny, commander. Even today, most of us survived.”

Jordan quickly became less serious as he said, “Oh, that’s it for you, you’re here not to die? Get the battle over and the job done? Go to your post, quickly, and get to work.”

“I know, commander, and I’m sure you also have to change your pants. It seems like you’ve pissed yourself.”

“Are you cubs gossiping about your company commander!?”

The rangers giggled, and no one talked of the deaths that had taken place today. They laughed and talked with cheer.

“Huh? Here comes the count,” muttered Jordan with a stern face after he wiped the grin off of it.

“Why are you so angry- Ouch!” Jordan screamed as he grabbed his shin. “Stop! Stop! This one’s broken!”

“You want me to break your other leg?” asked Vincent, then exclaimed, “Balahard First Ranger Company Commander!”

Ranger Jordan, first company commander, present!” replied Jordan, forgetting his pain as he stood at attention.

“You seem to know that you are a company commander. Here I thought that you were one of the rank and file, the way you ran at that ogre.”

“Well, see here, it’s because the situation was urgent- Ouch!”

Count Balahard kicked Jordan’s leg again.

“Don’t you know that if a company commander is killed, the burden of command on the platoon commanders is increased? Putting your entire company at risk for a single ogre? Are you even an officer?”

“I say again: The situation was- Aouch!”

“Well, was it an ogre or an orc? Was it something to push, or to avoid?”

“We almost did it- Sorry!” exclaimed Jordan as he saw Vincent ready his foot.

“Have you drunk too much, Jordan, that you are behaving so? What the hell do you want to teach the hatchlings under your command?” came the count’s rebuke.

“Sorry.”

“If you want to wet your blade, just tell me. I’ll throw you down the wall myself. You

can fight without end down there. Sound exciting? Do you really want that?"

Two hundred rangers were not a big force to defend the wall, and since such a force had almost been bereft of their commander, there was nothing more to say.

"Sorry," Jordan said, bowing his head in reticence.

"The same counts for you platoon commanders. If the platoon commander dies, you all die. If the rangers are annihilated due to a gap in the command structure, who will be responsible?"

"We apologize, m'lord."

"Don't die too easily. Survive and do your part, honoring those who came before. They deserve our remembrance," Vincent said in a heavy tone after clucking his tongue.

"We will keep that in mind."

Jordan and his platoon leaders bowed their heads in respect.

Once more, Count Balahard clucked his tongue and turned around.

"We have to know how to be commanders now, boys. Not how to cut things up close with swords," muttered Jordan as he watched Vincent's retreating back.

"It looks like you really wanted to fight."

The platoon commanders also looked across the castle grounds, and they nodded as they expressed sympathy with Jordan's words.

* * *

The number of monsters was terrible, indeed.

Winter Castle's rangers had to fight day and night, and no matter how many of the things they killed, there was no end. If a thousand were killed in a day, there would be more the following morning. It was a state that reminded everyone of the war against the Warlord.

But Winter Castle was strong, and they were no longer alone. Once the rangers became tired, the troops of the two gathered legions would climb the wall. Even the knights took turns with the soldiers.

Wizards of the White Night Tower also helped defend Winter Castle.

Even if they were only novices who had very few spells that could be used, with the spells dissipating at once, they were able to prevent mass casualties many a time.

There were also the iron cannons provided by the dwarves.

Moreover, reinforcements would have started marching upon the royal road by now.

Even then, it still remained impossible to throw open the castle gates and annihilate the monsters beyond. And no one was truly optimistic about the war, as they did not know the reason for so many monsters flocking in front of the castle. The monsters that had pushed out of the mountain range now formed a large army approaching 10,000.

And none of the monsters returned to the mountains. They stayed out of arrow range and attacked the fortress from time to time.

At first, they just rushed at the walls and tried to crudely climb them. However, as time passed, the attacks of the monsters changed systematically.

Dozens of monster species attacked the castle like a united army.

Orcs climbed the walls as they bestrode ladders or used crude ropes made by goblins. Ogres and trolls added their might to the siege as they battered at the gates. Swarms of harpies and griffons appeared from time to time, dropping monsters or stones upon the walls.

“It’s obvious that something is controlling the monsters,” said Arwen Kirgayen as she studied their behavior. Otherwise, monsters that killed and ate each other would never have shown such mutual cooperation in attacking the walls.

The problem was the identity of that something – was there a king of the monsters born to the world, something akin to the Warlord?

Was it something like him, or something new? Arwen didn’t know.

If the prince was here, he could have told her something. And as the battle raged on, so too did Arwen's slaughter. She ran wild over the wall as she slew monsters, sometimes hundreds of the things, all by herself.

The rangers were impressed by her remarkable performance and called her 'The Knight of Steel.'

There was no special reason for the name: Unlike the Winter Knights, who wore leather iron armor with iron plating, they gave Arwen the name because she was fully armored in iron.

The reasoning behind the nickname was crude, yet Arwen liked the title very much. She had always wished to be evaluated by her ability, not her appearance and gender, so being the Knight of Steel made her happy to the extreme.

"Here comes the knight of steel!"

Whenever the rangers on the wall cheered her on like this, Arwen secretly smiled behind the visor of her helm. And she paid enough of a price for the soldiers to keep on using her favorite nickname. She paid them with the blood and lives of monsters, over and over again.

Her actions were worthy of the name Knight of Steel, yet, the number of monsters did not decrease. No longer did they remain 10,000. A group of orcs appeared from out of the mountain range and joined the army, and they could be called a proper orc legion. Arwen frowned as she saw the orcish legion's red flag fluttering in the wind.

An unpleasant feeling overcame her, and the war that had swept through the north flashed through her mind.

The dark green waves that had followed the Warlord floated before her eyes like a fantasy.

"Surely…"

Arwen denied it again and again, but the more she did, the stronger grew the ominous premonition. And then she believed it without a doubt. The army of monsters that had flocked to Winter Castle now numbered 30,000.

'Auh uh uh uh uh!' a terrible roar sounded through the mountain range.

“Sir Arwen!” Vincent called her with a hard voice. She immediately drew her sword. She raised the momentum of her rings to the maximum so that the newer, more brittle soldiers of Balahard managed to overcome their fear.

A ray of light as luminescent as starlight burst from her sword.

‘Gwoo-wooh-ooh-ooh~’ a clear energy settled over the castle walls.

The rangers had seemed to have lost their souls, yet they now snapped awake.

But that was it – once they woke up, they still existed in the nightmare.

Arwen’s energy could not completely drive away the great power of the beast which had roared so deep from within the mountains. She rotated her rings even more.

‘Oah oh oh oh!’ the presence in the mountains cried out as if laughing at her.

This great enemy had not appeared, merely cried out, yet Arwen’s energy wavered – as if it would disappear immediately.

“Silent are the snowy peaks”

Just then, Arwen heard a familiar song ring out.

“Silent the frozen, bloody walls”

The voice, as if whispering in Arwen’s ear, began to resonate.

‘Woo~’

The inside of her helmet was hot as if it was aflame. Arwen could bear it no longer as she ripped off her helmet and caught her breath.

Her gaze swept over the wall, and there he was – wielding a sword that shone so brightly with the twilight which banishes the night. The first prince was reciting a war poem.

“Only the sound of the horn is heard, for we advance at dawn.”

The energy of Arwen Kirgayen, no longer a knight in danger, soared to the ends of

the sky.

CHAPTER 158
FINALLY RETURNED (3)

Knights who had managed to survive the energy sang along with the war poem, their swords raised.

‘Buwooo woo!’

The sound of a horn rang from somewhere.

‘Buwooo wooo!’

Then, dozens of horns were blown all at once. Rangers upon the walls of Winter Castle began singing along.

‘Krrk, krrrk,’ the muzzle of the cannon was raised.

‘Oah oh oh oh oh!’

Once more, the presence in the mountain range cried out.

However, no one was shaken, for the rising spirits of the northern army have become as strong as a wall, and the beast’s roar could no longer cross it. Arwen exhaled, her face flushing red.

The soldiers could feel the change on their skins. All hearts within the castle were thrilled by the presence of the first prince. The endlessly jumping heat finally settled down, forming itself into an uplifting sensation. Then the prince turned around. He tilted the point of his raised sword and narrowed his stance.

‘Chuck, Chuk,’ knights bowed down in the snow. Arwen followed their example as she stuck her sword in the snow and knelt her legs.

“Endless praise to your Highness the First Prince, who has finally returned.”

The veteran rangers were excited as the greetings rang out and as they blew upon

their horns. The knights roared in joy. Even if only a single person returned, so much has changed by this.

There was no more fear of the monster horde on the snowfield, nor was there a fear of the unknown monster nestled in the mountain.

“Welcome back, your Highness the First Prince!” Count Balahard welcomed the prince, his face overjoyed.

The honor given by thousands of soldiers and knights died down, and the first prince gave an arrogant nod.

The prince’s attitude seemed to be one without hesitation – as if he took their obeisance for granted from the beginning, as if all these troops had been his from the very start.

Arwen looked at the prince without even blinking.

The last time she had seen him, he had still been a boy, unable to hide his youth. The first prince had indeed become a man. As Arwen watched his matured figure, an old memory suddenly came to her mind. She remembered how she had hated and despised him for the unforgivable insult he had done to her.

She then believed she would never be able to shake off her contempt and hatred, even after making an oath of vassalage to him, so she always treated him with courtesy and formalized false sincerity.

She never believed she would ever become loyal and devoted to the first prince. Arwen had believed this with certainty. Now, more than anyone else, she was welcoming the return of the prince.

It was a great pleasure to see him, and it made her surprisingly uncomfortable to admit this.

And before he had come, Arwen had fought without ceasing, believing that she had to fill the empty seat of the prince. She ran all along those narrow walls to make sure the seeds the prince had sown did not die in vain. Yet, she only added one sword to the battle, and it was impossible for a single sword to support the entire castle. Arwen felt freed from a burden that she hadn’t even known was there.

There were many things she wanted to say, but she kept all those words deeply hidden in her heart.

At long last, Arwen released some of the power she had gained, letting that stand in the stead of the words she could not utter. The prince's gaze roved over the walls yet settled on her for a while.

'Haha,' the prince laughed, and that was enough. It didn't suit Arwen's personality to bare her heart.

It was more than enough that a smile and a show of respect served as the greeting of this reunion.

'Pchk, Pchk, Pchk,' the prince ascended the stairs to the castle wall, and when he finally reached the wall, 'chuck,' he came to a halt.

Arwen stood behind the prince, taking it for granted that this was where she had belonged.

"You'll never be alone again," she whispered sweetly, softly. The prince looked back for a moment as if to make sure that he had indeed heard a low whisper, but he said nothing as he once more showed his back to Arwen.

The prince headed for the center of the wall, and the one-eyed cavalry commander and Count Balahard followed him. In due time, the prince stood facing the mountain range after he had reached the middle of the wall.

His gaze was not directed at the horde of monsters that filled the snowfield. Rather, his eyes were looking at a spot in the faraway mountain range.

* * *

There were a lot of welcoming faces on the wall: Dear Arwen and Vincent, the one-eyed Quéon and Jordan, as well as the other rangers. However, now was not the time to share in the joy of reunion. I channeled my energy as I lifted up a banner of Winter Castle that flapped before me. I pushed back my shoulder and threw the banner with all of my mana.

'Kshworr!' the banner flew over the snowfield with such a roar that it seemed deafening, and it finally reached its destination: The very center of the snowfield

upon which tens of thousands of monsters clamored.

'Swang!' the banner struck into the earth, and monsters that became naught but bloody sacks of flesh scattered in every direction. The bloody flag of Balahard fluttered in the center of the carnage.

"You shall not pass that line!"

The monsters were excited by the smell of blood, and they tried to charge at the castle: But they could come no further. I did not allow it.

"Isn't it mine, either those high halls or that dignified throne?

"There is nothing that is not my seat."

I sang [Poetry of the Defeated King] in my mind as a warning to the beasts and demons who had invaded my territory while I was away. And not a mere warning, but a proof of my karma after I had killed the Warlord, usurping his throne. Fortunately, the monsters fully understood my meaning, and they stumbled and retreated back over the line drawn by the banner.

However, their leader on the other side of the mountain seemed to have different ideas. A great energy started writhing in those mountains. Unlike the shapeless roar of the beast, it was a clear, concrete energy. The anger and hostile intent within it was obvious. The monsters that have begun to retreat with groans now ran wild once more, all of them releasing an eerie light. It was all too clear where such madness was aimed at.

I raised by hand and pointed at the banner I had thrown.

"Cannon."

Vincent raised his fist at my words, then he shouted straight away, "Banner!", not even giving the cannoneers time to realign their barrels.

The iron cannons fired with fearful report when he had barely stopped speaking.

'Doof! Doof!'

Surprisingly enough, all the shells landed exactly at the border I had drawn.

I saw Vincent and his unspoken question of “When?”, his face gloomy.

The moment I had thrust the banner, I had also angled all the guns with my mana.

“If we had to hold out for a day or two more… I don’t know where we would’ve been had your Highness not come,” said Quéon, and he did not laugh or frown. “A hundred Black Lancers are waiting in front of the city gate.”

“Why are the lancers there?” I asked.

“You are charging out, aren’t you?”

I finally laughed and replied with, “Right. I will go out.”

So, I headed straight down from the wall, and it was all as Quéon had said: One hundred Black Lancers and three fully armed knight squadrons were waiting under the gates.

Even my own knights were there.

“I said it was so urgent that we almost charged out alone,” said Eli from where he stood among the knights.

“Your Highness,” said Adelia as she approached, handed me my helmet, and quietly checked the buckling upon my armor.

“I feel like I’m being pushed out of these gates by all of you,” said I.

“So you’re not going out?”

Instead of answering, I mounted my horse and put on my helm.

“Eli, Adelia, and I will take the lead,” came my order.

“I will be with you,” said Arwen suddenly as she steered her horse and let it slip in behind mine.

“Lord Arwen,” said Bernardo Eli, so thrilled that he had spoken her name that he couldn’t think of anything more to say. Then, “You’ve grown a lot of hair.”

What he said, in the end, was a true spectacle. How would Eli know how much hair she had grown, with her head ensconced in such a helm?

“We can greet one another and reunite after this battle,” came Arwen’s somewhat chilly reply.

“You aren’t a knight of steel, but a knight of iron walls!” came Eli’s petulant reply.

Quéon gave voice to some unknown sound and the knights who heard it laughed and laughed, finding it to be hilarious.

Meanwhile, Vincent wanted to know if we were ready to go, so he glanced at me. I nodded, and he shouted with vigor, “Open the gates!”

I heard the men laboring at the gates encourage one another as the sound of the mighty pulley rolling echoed through the gatehouse.

‘Gthud!’ monsters running mad could be seen through the crack as the gate started lifting itself with a roar.

‘Cheolkup,’ I lowered my visor, and the inside of my helmet quickly became heated with my breath. I breathed in the pleasant hot air, drew my sword, pointed it beyond the gates, and roared, “Charge!”

“Ha!” the knights answered at once.

My horse reared, gave a brief whinny, and then charged on.

‘Dukuduk dukuduk dukduk!’

The sound of hundreds of hoofbeats followed after me.

‘Doof! Doof!’

The iron cannons roared upon the walls.

‘Woooh!’ hundreds of swords keened with mana.

A flame of true spirit bloomed on the edge of my sword.

Under my breath, I recited a war poem.

`Oooh~ Oooh~' the rings of the knights resonated as they responded to my song.

'Thump~ Thump~ Thump~ Thump~'

My heart started jumping like mad.

"Charge!"

We aimed for the very center of the horde, where the flaming iron of the cannons fell.

My horse charged into battle, and we were engulfed in madness, with monsters screaming in our faces.

The orc legion with their red banner was right in front of us, and I was so glad to see those ugly cheeks and filthy dark-green skins once more.

"I missed you, orcs!" I shouted as I slashed down with Twilight, wreathed in blue flames.

The orc warriors blocking us off to the front collapsed.

"Ha!" I pushed myself into the middle of the orcs.

'Swot!' as I raised my sword, Eli's voice came to my ears, and he was singing [Poetry of the Full Moon].

And in the next moment, Bernardo Eli passed me by. Adelia began singing [Poetry of Sudden Change] as she too charged out ahead. On my left, there shone a sword as pale as the moonlight, and to my right, a golden blade that blazed like the sun, and both these blades were raping the orcish lines.

Few orcs remained alive as the sun and moon rose, met, and spread disaster. Unfortunately, this impressive scene did not fell enough orcs.

"Ha!" a sword shining with starlight started cleaving into the orcs as it passed by Adelia and Eli. It was Arwen who had run past me, and she was slaughtering orcs left and right.

I looked at my sword all of a sudden and saw that the darkly burning flame of my true spirit was without color.

“Go first!” I shouted, and the Black Lancers charged past me with Quéon at their lead.

“Fire!” and the lancers fired their crossbows at once.

“Open ranks! Throw!”

Knights spread into a line and threw their hatchets.

‘Kwadaf! Kwadaf!’ the flaming missiles of the iron cannons erupted as they crashed into the middle of the monsters.

‘Sasasasasak~’ thousands of arrows flew overhead, and the monsters pierced by them screamed.

I opened my eyes and looked for an enemy, but there remained none nearby. Only corpses were spread out before me.

Even if I had charged out of the gates, I had not even gotten the chance to swing my sword, even a few times.

I kicked into my horse’s flanks, and it sped up.

As I gripped my sword, I passed the three sword masters and slashed into the enemies before me.

* * *

Silence descended over the wall of Winter Castle. None spoke, for everyone was looking at the snowfield with blank faces. The total number of monsters upon the snowfield, both large and small, was at least 30,000.

And yet- less than five hundred knights were tearing the monsters apart. And at the forefront were four knights, each with swords blazing dark, auspicious, pale, or brilliant.

And no monster could stand before them: Not the hordes of feral trolls, nor the ferocious orcs or even the ogres, called the kings of the mountains. These monsters

merely had their heads severed or their hearts pierced, and they died.

As the knights split that sea of monsters, they charged on without hesitation. And finally, they fully penetrated that large army of 30,000 monsters. Everyone on the wall stood with their mouths wide agape.

“Wow! Ahh!” someone shouted then, and soon everyone shouted in excitement at the amazing feat of only three hundred knights.

“How can they come back after passing through all the monsters like that?” a ranger company commander asked, expressing his doubts. The cheers rang high and then suddenly stopped.

Everyone on the wall looked at the distant knights.

The knights who had pierced through the army of monsters were reforming their lines, and once more, the swords and lances at their lead pointed to the center of the monsters.

“Surely?” spitting in the face of the world’s end, the reorganized ranks of knights charged at the monster legion.

“Oh, that’s how they’ll come back,” said the ranger company commander, nodding in surprise.

No one sympathized with his gormless admiration of the knights.

They opened their eyes and looked at the knights, who were returning to the walls by way of slaughtering the monsters. And they finally came back.

Even though they were drenched in blood and gasping for breath, they were in good shape.

The gates ground open and thumped close once more, and cheers erupted only moments later.

CHAPTER 159
BAD DESTINY OR DESTINY (1)

I took off my helmet.

The unique stormy clime of the north rushed at my face, which had been heated, and it quickly cooled. The wind cooling my face right after I took off the helmet was refreshing, yet it only lasted for a while. By the time the cheers of the soldiers subsided, my face had become so cold that it felt as if it would freeze.

As I contended with my tingling face, a welcome sight approached.

“Your Highness.”

Vincent, my dear Count of Winter Castle, was in front of me.

“Enchga!” I jumped from my horse, and Vincent approached me with open arms.

‘Strkkch,’ those strong arms hugged me, and Vincent didn’t seem to care about the monster blood and viscera on my body. I, too, clenched his shoulders with strength.

“Thank you for coming back safely.”

We were greeting one another properly at last, reuniting, and it was a stiff greeting with both of us half-frozen in the cold. Nevertheless, the embrace was warm, and I laughed heartily and praised Vincent for his hard work.

“You’ve been working hard,” said I.

“You think I’ve expended effort? Or are you talking about all the ceaseless toil I’ve been doing?”

Vincent replied, and he did so light-heartedly.

“Yeah,” he continued, “it was a lot of work. Someone ran away when faced with all that work, so I was struggling to take care of it all. It was more than enough: To listen

to the roar of monsters under the walls while looking through a bunch of documents."

As I listened to Vincent pour out words without halt, I tried to stumble from his grasp, but- 'Crscht~' Vincent refused to let go of me.

"Now that you are here, there is a lot of work for you."

"I just came from a fight," said I.

"Yeah? I fought like that every day while your Highness was away – against monsters and piles of paper."

As I watched Vincent holding my shoulders and raising his chin, I could form no suitable response.

"I didn't know that your Highness would appear and disappear on a wyvern like that."

"I didn't disappear that quickly-"

"Oh, that's right. You didn't disappear that quickly. You met with the dwarves and then took Bernardo Eli. You stayed for two days and left without seeing all the work I've done. And I had been most resourceful," Vincent grumbled. It seemed that he still resented me for coming here, seeing only to my own business, and then departing for Dotrin.

"It's rather that you should have told me you're coming when you came and told me you're going before you left. Do you know how embarrassed I was when I heard that your Highness has gone?"

"I left you a letter."

"Ah, you mean that letter? 'I'm going to the Dotrin Kingdom. It will take about a year.' It was written exactly like that when I got it."

I shut my mouth and decided to endure his resentful nagging. But how much can a man endure? Vincent's nagging was truly endless. No longer able to bear it, I glanced at the one-eyed Quéon and the rangers who stood behind Vincent, silently imploring them for help.

“Hmm, I forgot to check on the condition of my horse,” Quéon awkwardly grumbled and turned around.

“Are you retrieving your arrows, lads? Collect them as soon as possible! You know that arrows don’t fall from the sky around here, right?”

“They can fall from the sky, though. The right way t’say it would be: They don’t grow from the ground.”

“Is that right? That’s what’s important now, lads! I can’t leave you damned cubs alone for a minute – I have to check everything myself to make sure the job gets done proper-like.”

Jordan and his rangers all hustled and bustled before disappearing. The knights had already fled before I even turned to them.

“It seems that the count has long missed his Highness,” said Arwen, becoming the one to save me.

“Since he has gone through difficult times in the Kingdom of Dotrin, and as he ran straight here into battle, his Highness’s fatigue must be great. Count Balahard, can you take this into account and put off the reunion for a while?”

Vincent was dissatisfied by Arwen’s gentle urging, yet he couldn’t refute her words, so he let me go.

“If I had gone straight to the offices of the count, there would’ve been a whole lot of nagging. That is why I left only a letter,” I grumbled, and when Vincent heard this, and his eyes stretched wide, I stepped behind Arwen. Seeming to wonder why I was so excited, Arwen shook her head and sighed.

“Very well, take a break this once. I’ll continue my story later,” said Vincent, inviting me to go and rest. Unfortunately, I could not accept such an offer.

“No. I don’t have time to rest.”

I looked toward the mountain range beyond the wall.

The monsters have retreated, but the presence felt from within those mountains remained unchanged, and that great hostility and anger were constantly scratching

at my nerves.

“Please summon all the commanders.”

Vincent looked at me, dissatisfied.

“Right now.”

* * *

The commanders of Winter Castle gathered together, and their faces were all stern.

“First, let’s hear the accounts of the past.”

Vincent glanced at me, and Jordan, the new company commander, stood and began to explain the circumstances.

He told of the sudden eclipse phenomenon, the gathering of the monsters after that, as well as of the subsequent battles. It was no special thing to see monsters go crazy every year at Winter Castle, which was a fortress originally constructed for battling such monsters. The only difference was the omen of the solar eclipse that occurred before this newest riot of monsters, as well as the unprecedented numbers and types of monsters attacking the castle.

“Thirty thousand? It’s really amazing.”

“I didn’t know one who has just pushed through the heart of such an enormous army would be speaking like that,” joked Vincent, and the commanders laughed along with his words. Their faces possessed a solid, ruddy color, and there was no fear of the large army of 30,000 to be seen anywhere.

They were all full of fighting spirit, and they were confident in their ability to fight, rather than succumbing to despair in the face of death.

I muttered my admiration, and Vincent said with a proud face, “Because we have been steadily preparing for war, we have held them off this well.”

I asked Vincent as to the current state of Winter Castle’s military after the recent attack, and instead of explaining it to me verbally, he handed me a sheet of paper that had a whole lot of letters on it.

I quickly scanned through the contents of the document.

1 Ranger Regiment (1,800 strong)

2 Heavy Infantry Companies (400 strong)

1 Artillery Company (200 strong)

Black Lancers (104 strong)

Winter Knights (112 strong)

5 Other Knight Squadrons (484 strong)

In total, the power of Winter Castle and Balahard lay in more than 3,000 troops.

But that wasn't the end – At the back of the document, there was listed about two legions of soldiers and three knight squadrons sent by the lords of the north.

It all came to a whopping 7,000 troops, and not just any troops, but high-quality soldiers with an abnormally high ratio of knights.

It was a number that was worthy of confidence.

"Now here are four Sword Master grade knights," I muttered. This northern fortress had once been as dangerous as a flickering candle – now it has become a great flame that could not be distinguished by the northern storm.

I was so happy with this change that my mouth grew stiff, but I forcibly prevented myself from grinning as I straightened my expression. The situation wasn't favorable enough to feel only pride. Winter Castle has definitely grown stronger, but the enemies of winter have also become stronger.

I remembered it so clearly: The energy of the enemy beyond those mountain peaks was familiar to me. It was a damnable monster, a fierce power among the warriors of the greenskin race, and it had certainly used fervor.

It wasn't a crude, nasty type of fervor; no, rather a terrible form of fervor belonging to those orcish beings who possessed royal spirit.

“It seems that the King of the Orcs has appeared.”

As I said this, Vincent looked at me with a stern face.

“Are you serious? If you’re kidding, it isn’t funny,” he said with fresh anger on that hard face.

“I myself stuffed his head and mounted it upon the castle walls. You must have seen the damned thing when you came here. His head is still hanging above my gate! No way that he’s the monster crouching in those mountains!” Vincent continued to criticize my remarks as careless, asking how that which is dead can live again. His was hasty anger, but I tolerated it for a minute.

Winter Castle suffered a permanent wound under the hand of the King of the Orcs, and Vincent had lost his father. Rangers have lost comrades who have stood with them for years or decades, and knights lost their central pillar of support, having to live with the stigma all their lives of fleeing while their lord was still on the battlefield.

Even Winter Castle itself was captured, with its former denizens forced to wander the north.

The convictions and self-esteem of the Balahards became ephemeral, and the splendid history that their ancestors had built up was buried in a ditch. And the cause of it all was the King of the Orcs. Yet, the commanders did not become angry, for they did not dare let the title of that accursed orc leave their mouths.

And as they have lost so much, so too did I.

“Pease explain,” the commanders asked me, instead of bursting into anger and drawing their knives.

“As there is not only one king of humans, so too there are multiple kings of the orcs.”

Warlord was the name given to a king who led the War Legions among orcs qualified to do so. In addition to the warlords, there were numerous other orcish kings. And this being was definitely one of them; I was so sure of it.

“Are you saying that after you killed the king, a new king appeared?” Vincent asked with a frown. His anger had abated, yet my words still seemed unbelievable to him.

That kings of the orcs, beings who had not existed for hundreds of years, have appeared, one after the other, in the span of three years? It was not strange that he did not easily believe me.

I didn't have to persuade him, though. I just had to wait. I shut my mouth, Vincent remained silent, and in this time, I hoped that the commanders of Winter Castle would accept my words. After a while, Vincent spoke up.

"If someone else has said this, I would have considered them useless at once."

His was a blasphemous tone, yet the emotions contained therein were ones of obvious trust.

"Fuck. I don't like this. I want to pack it all up and move south," said Vincent as he looked at me, speaking his mind bluntly.

"What are you going to do?" he then asked.

"We have to fight it and get rid of it," I answered without hesitation because this course of action had been decided from the beginning. Vincent nodded, and the other commanders accepted my answer as if it was the natural thing to do. Anger and confusion no longer existed within them. They cared not how many soldiers they had or who they were; all they were determined to do was destroy the enemy and save their land.

My heart was thudding – Their fiery demeanor could not be extinguished even if they were faced by the harsh winter, and it seemed to have been transferred to me.

I struggled to control this burning spirit within me, for my passion should not be burning so. This place was not Dotrin, and no longer was I a mercenary. This was the kingdom I had to protect, and I was here to lead these men. First, the nature of the enemy had to be determined.

If the King of the Greenskins ensconced in the mountains was a Warlord, things would be easy… If he was not, we had to defend ourselves. The question was how was I to determine the nature of the enemy lurking in the mountains, but fortunately, I had a way to find the answer.

The was a being in the north with the power of seeing the truth hidden in a lie, and see the original form of a thing, past the distortion.

White Night Mage Ophelia, with her power of [Shinan], would already have grasped the identity of this being.

While Vincent and his commanders were forming countermeasures against the monsters, I silently stood up and then set off at once to find the High Lich.

Fortunately, she was awaiting me in Winter Castle, not the newly-built tower. The dark shadows under the walls of the fortress halls whispered to me. They urged me to go ahead to their mistress; they whispered and guided me to Ophelia. She was in the highest spire of Winter Castle.

“Ophelia.”

She was looking out over the snowfield but now turned to me. She was in her original state as a skeletal High Lich, not in a human form. I tried to cheerily greet her but stiffened when I saw-

“You… Your hand?”

Her bare fingerbones stuck from her sleeves, yet they were now three where they had always been five.

She was missing her little finger and her ring finger, and they seemed to have disappeared so cleanly that I was as if they had never existed from the beginning.

“It is the way it is. It’s a price I had to pay for glimpsing the truth not allowed for me to see,” Ophelia said. It is said that the power of [Shinan] is by no means the same as omniscience, and sometimes you have to pay the price for the weight of the truth that you are seeking.

I groaned. Fingers were never a trivial thing for a mage to lose, for the magic circles and the language of magic that was drawn in the air were complex and difficult to complete with even a full ten fingers.

Now Ophelia had lost two – the magic circles and words that she can draw could not be the same as before.

Perhaps the rate at which the magic reached completion would be slowed, or maybe some magic that she could use before has now become unusable.

Either way, the damage to her skill could not be small, and I couldn't figure out what truth it was that she would pay such a heavy price for.

"You seem curious about what I saw," said Ophelia.

I nodded and asked, "Did you see the past, or the future?"

"The past and future both. Something that has already transpired and something that is yet to transpire. Those are some of the truths that I have seen."

The moment I heard her say this, I became convinced. The truth she had peeped at for the cost of her fingers has to do with the eclipse that occurred some time ago.

The return of the old beings was an event close to the ancient past, yet at the same time, a sign of changes that will occur in the future.

"Would you like to know more?"

I shook my head. Telling the truth to others was more expensive than peeking at the truth on your own. I was quite curious about any truth concerning the phenomena, but I had no intention of making Ophelia pay even a harsher price. If there had been a need to do so, I believe she would have already informed me.

"It's better if you don't tell me. If you force yourself further, you won't have any talents left after all that suffering."

Ophelia gave a dry laugh.

"Now your concern is the existence of the king crouching in that mountain range."

"He had spread his energy all over the world. I figured that you would have figured out what kind of being owns that energy."

Ophelia stared at me as I said this. I had no way to know what that faceless skull was thinking. After a while, her jaw began rattling, as if she was laughing.

"Your question is, amazingly, the same as the first one."

"How is it the same?" I asked, not sure what she found so funny.

Her jaw rattled once more, and she said, “My answer is also no different.”

“What?”

“The past and future both. Something that has already existed and something that is yet to be born into existence.”

I frowned at her answer, which was more of a question, yet Ophelia then said something I had never considered.

“Gruhorn, you already know him.”

“I do?”

“You must have met him. Although, at that time, you weren’t as human as you are now.”

The moment I heard that, a cold energy flowed down my back.

“He is a very old entity, like you.”

I groaned. All the monarchs of the greenskin race I have met with were all dead, and I watched them die with my own eyes – All excepting one.

An ill-fated avenger had to fight against the greenskins with flames that eventually scorched his life and thrust him into an unknown wilderness.

And there was a song about this poor knight, unable to complete his quests even after he had burned everything down. The enemy was a being that came to inspire the final verses of [Poetry of Revenge], which has now become [Poetry of Divination].

“Overlord.”

The accursed Overlord was the only king I had never witnessed the end of.

CHAPTER 160
BAD DESTINY OR DESTINY (2)

Orcs had a short lifespan.

This was because, inherently, the time gifted to them was shorter than that of other races, and at the same time, because their lives were harsh, bestrewn by constant struggle and war.

But there was an exception among them, and this was the Overlord.

As far as I could remember, he was older than any orc and had reigned longer than any king. Even when numerous orcs had died in the Great war, the Overlord had maintained a firm grip on existence.

And if he had not been greedy, he would have remained the overlord for a long time. However, his pride became as great as the years that he had reigned, and it led him to his ruin.

He reached a state where he saw himself as a deity, and thus, he longed to become the God of the Orcs. How absurd was it not when I heard that a great army of 200,000 orcs led by ten Warlords was advancing toward Hwaryong's nest. And not long after that, the news reached me that the orcs had been destroyed.

I had never seen his end in person, but I thought at the time the overlord must surely have met his death alongside his legions, for Hwaryong was never merciful toward those that invaded its territory.

But it seemed that the beast yet lived.

"Ur-Du, the Overlord of the Enraged Flame Legion. That's the name of the enemy that you seek."

He was alive, and now, so long after the Great War, he has returned to the world.

"How? How did he survive?"

Ophelia shook her head and said, “That is not what matters now.”

It was as she said, for what mattered now was not how the Overlord had survived the battle with Hwaryong.

All that was important was that the dark green flames that had swept over the world in the past were now dreaming of a resurrection. I had to stop it. Winter Castle was not the problem, for the Overlord’s greed was not so petty as to be contented by the mere destruction of a single castle, a single kingdom.

I turned my head and concentrated my entire mind on the snow-capped Blade’s Edge Mountains, with their mountain peaks stained red by the Overlord’s presence.

The presence of that feral and fierce fervor so peculiar to the orcs thrilled my heart, and as I continued to search mentally, I saw a strand of ominous energy wriggling within the mountains.

I felt a blind rage that could never be felt within ordinary orcs, a deep and bottomless wrath of a king that wanted to become a myth through his own might, yet eventually, lost everything.

I blamed myself for his energy was so clear. I held a poem of an ill-fated avenger who had died fighting trying to annihilate the Overlord, and the karma and qi contained in that poem were constantly whispering to me of the orc’s existence. To only realize it now- It seemed that the Overlord was too excited after returning after so many ages, or perhaps his vision has been narrowed in his searches for an urgent turnaround.

Organize your thoughts!

Whatever the reasons behind the beast’s action, what I had to do was clear: It was my duty to annihilate the invaders who have dared cross into my territory.

“Was this overlord above the Warlord?”

The expression ‘Mountain over the mountain’ would be used in this case. Having cleared my thoughts, I began descending the spire, trying to come up with a countermeasure.

“This is just the beginning,” Ophelia’s dry voice stopped me mid-stride.

“The world is always one step ahead of one’s thoughts, so all you can see is but a fragment of the impending truth.”

I looked back, and those gloomy eyes peculiar to the High Lich were looking straight at me.

“Keep that in mind.”

I merely replied that I knew I had to, and as I descended the spire, Agnes spoke to me in awe.

{It is strong}

“It’s natural for her to be strong. Even in my lifetime, she was one of the best high mages. And after becoming a lich, she must have spent hundreds of years exploring nothing but magic.”

{I’m not just talking about the High Lich, about the White Night Mage. I am talking about the entire castle}

I was amazed at Agnes’s tone as she said this.

{None of the people I’ve encountered here so far are afraid of death. And none of them bear the weight of death upon their shoulders} said Agnes. I knew this: There existed many brave people, but few that would stay strong even if feeling the overbearing presence of death. Courage borne from ignorance is not true courage.

{All of them are upright folk with sturdy hearts. Their swords are not blunt, so the term ‘those with dragon hearts’ well describes this place}

Her unexpected compliment made me feel better.

“And compared to your Bavarian Iron Blood Legion?” I asked.

{Their scale and strength are not enough, but their spirit and solidarity is} Agnes said, adding, {It’s a great army}

Considering her nature, she who was so stingy with her compliments, it could be said that the troops of Winter Castle have received high praise.

They were very pleasant words for me to hear, for Winter Castle was a very important place for me.

* * *

Vincent came to me, having been too scared to follow me up into the spire. It seems that a rough plan had been prepared while I was away. As I listened to his report, I shook my head.

“Scrap it and start from scratch again,” said I, and Vincent’s face crumpled.

I knew they did their best to come up with countermeasures and that they would feel bad if they heard my answer. I was a bit sorry about this, but I had no other option.

All of the strategies and tactics concocted by the commanders of Winter Castle were based on the assumption that the enemy was the same as the Warlord.

But our enemy was not – he might be as fierce and strong as a Warlord, but he was far more insidious. And I myself was different than when I had faced the Warlord, for, at that time, I was just a young warrior who fought and got trampled on. I was just a young warrior who was excited about the reconstruction of my kingdom.

However, the overlord was a big-brained being who had fought countless wars in the Great War. Unlike the Warlord, who was killed without even leaving a name, Overlord Ur-Du was a monster that had become notorious all over the world.

And such an entity was now aiming for Winter Castle.

It would not be enough for us to strengthen the walls and bar the gates, as against the Warlord.

“Oh my gosh. Well, if there is such an orc,” said Vincent then frowned, sighed, and spoke on, “Well, I’ve never lost money betting on your Highness’s words. I understand things, for now.”

Vincent continued to complain, saying that we would now have to have a countermeasure council all day long.

“Okay. Good job,” said I, trying to turn around, and then stopped at a sudden thought.

“Vincent.”

“Why are you calling me?” he near-groaned as he looked at me.

As time passed, the face of a man who almost had his father’s face began overlapping with the face of that old knight who had passed away in the unknown wilderness.

I could no longer judge the truth – was Vincent truly the reincarnation of the avenger, or did they merely share names?

If the avenger was truly reincarnated, was it a coincidence that the Overlord who destroyed his former life now faced him once more as the leader of the enemy?

Had it been destined to be like this from the beginning?

I was unsure.

“Be careful.”

I just hoped that Vincent would not fade away as sadly as he had in his previous life.

“This is not a day or two of the old war, but a new one.”

“Why is your face so serious? People are starting to feel weird,” said Vincent in a casual tone as he struck me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I have been working for so long due to a certain someone that I let go of my sword. I won’t be able to fight, even if I do go out and meet the foe,” Vincent continued, his face getting closer to mine. “So don’t have such an anxious face. Unlike my father, I have no intention of dying before I see your Highness ascend the throne.”

Having said that, Vincent giggled and began to stride away from me.

“Only your appearance has changed. Inside you’re still the same: A kid,” came Vincent’s disrespectful words from afar, yet they were filled with undeniable affection.

“Please come to terms with the desires that you couldn’t fulfill last time,” I wished for Vincent.

The avenger who died while fighting orcs in his previous life – the lord of the castle

who blocks off the orcish army in his present life.

Hopefully, the karma and spirit of the man from his previous life will be completed in this one.

* * *

That evening was calm.

The monsters which had retreated to the mountain range did not appear again.

However, the energy of the Overlord that was felt coming from beyond the red mountain peaks was still directed towards Winter Castle. The day passed in tension as if it was the eve before the storm.

And the reinforcements sent from the capital reached Winter Castle.

“Huh?”

“How come they came to the north?”

The rangers and Winter Knights gossiped as they saw the troops, and I understood why they did so.

The bright golden armor of the knights belonged to the palace knights of the royal family, knights who never left the royal palace.

“And how about those soldiers following the palace knights?”

The banner they held was that of the Second Central Army, the most elite soldiers of the kingdom, tasked with defending the capital. And at their fore, there marched an old, white-haired knight. He was the commander of the palace knights, the king’s personal escort, Count Schmilde Stuttgart, Nogisa.

“You have suffered much in coming so far, elder,” came Vincent’s greeting as he ran out to greet the old man.

“A homage to the blood and sweat of the Balahards that has drenched this land,” came the Nogisa’s words as he raised his sword, with Vincent and him expressing their respect to each other.

“When my father was alive, he sang your praises, Count Stuttgart.”

“He was the best knight in the kingdom, as far as I know. Because I am on a mission, I have not gotten the chance to bless his memory in a funerary right by piercing the ground with my sword.”

“It would be unjust to demand such a thing. I am merely grateful that you have come to our aid in such a difficult time, elder.”

Their attitudes have become so polite that it was almost a battle of politeness, and I found it all to be a bit much. Looking at such an embarrassing display, it felt as if I was dying on the inside. Then, the old man came to me, and when he came to stand before me, he said with a sigh, “Your Highness, please be considerate, so that my forces can fulfill your commands.”

Some of the veteran rangers stood tall and laughed, saying that now that all the folk of the capital had come to join us, we could charge out at once. But their laughter didn’t last long.

‘Chnck~’ the old man suddenly knelt before me.

‘Schnk!’ and one hundred knights knelt with Nogisa.

“I am Schmilde Stuttgart, commander of the Knights of the Palace. I have just arrived with the First Squadron Palace Knights, one-hundred total!”

All the palace knights were kneeling before me.

“Uh? Huh.”

I looked around, frowning at the sudden and excessive display of respect.

Vincent’s mouth was wide open, and the rangers had stiffened where they stood. The other knights all wore stupid faces.

I only then did I realize it: Nogisa was the king’s first escort knight, and the first among the palace knights serve only the king. The only being these knights would bow to in obeisance was the king – or the one who is set to become king in the future.

CHAPTER 161
BAD DESTINY OR DESTINY (3)

It wasn't just the court knights, for the soldiers of the Second Central Army had also knelt.

"Well. Oh…" Vincent took in the scene, flabbergasted. His own face showed his internal conflict of whether he should kneel or not. It was so funny that I wanted to leave things as they were, but I decided to clear up the situation before the atmosphere became too heavy.

'Shhk~'

When I glanced at Nogisa, he stood up once more.

'Shrrk!' his knights and the troops of the central army followed suit as they stood.

More than 2,000 people have knelt and stood up at once, so I felt rather dizzied by the sight of it. All this attention was directed at me, so why did Vincent and the soldiers of Winter Castle look so awkward?

As expected, they could still not snap awake.

Laughter burst from my lips, for we were warring against tens of thousands of enemies, and yet a bunch of steel-faced warriors were surprised, their faces silly, because another group of soldiers had knelt before me.

Stupid- they should have figured this out before the soldiers had even knelt. What does it symbolize when the king's first escort knight and his palace knights depart the palace as a group?

Vincent threw a questioning glance my way, but instead of answering him, I arrogantly raised my chin and took off my gloves. I reached out my hand and showed it to him. It was the royal family ring, the crown prince's seal – allowed only to the heir.

“Uh?” But there was no ring. I was sure it had been there a while ago.

‘Shhp,’ someone stepped in beside me. It was Adelia, and she placed the ring in my hand.

The ring had a large ruby embedded into it, and it was the crown prince’s seal I had been seeking.

Why was this with Adelia?

“Your Highness gave it to me a few days ago, saying that it was too difficult to grasp a sword with it on,” said Adelia, as if seeing the question in my eyes. Only then did I remember that I had given the oversized ring to her due to it not being suited for battle.

“Hmmgm,” I coughed and stretched my hand out again.

Everyone was looking at my hand. Nogisa only had reproachment in his eyes.

“What kind of devil treats the position and possessions of the crown prince so carelessly?” came the old knight’s rebuke.

“Then make the thing easier fitting,” came my excuse.

The large, glamorous ring was useless except to prove my identity, and it was rather uncomfortable to wear. If I wore something like that, I would barely be able to win a fight. It would be a miracle if it didn’t break my fingers. The old man snapped his lips at my words, but I got in the first word in edgewise.

“The prince who wears such a ring is not one who fights at the fore, but one that leads from the rear while saying quaint things. I don’t need it.”

The old man opened his mouth, but I quickly spoke up once more.

“I’m here to fight. I’m not here to stand around and mouth off.”

Nogisa had opened and closed his mouth several times, yet he now shook his head and sighed.

Vincent approached Nogisa and said, “You have to be prepared. To protect his

Highness means that you and your palace knights will be at the center of the battle."

I didn't know whether Vincent was being jocular or comforting, and as I studied his face, I guessed it to be half-half. Up until now, Vincent has treated Nogisa so humbly, yet suddenly, he was wearing the face of a count, not the face of the son of an old man's departed friend.

And the Count of Winter Castle, or northerners in general, did not like the knights of the southern regions. They believed that they merely played at being knights, swinging their swords from the safety of the rear. They believed that one couldn't be a man until one truly understood what it meant to wield a sword.

Such thoughts swam over Vincent's face. He wanted them on the battlefield at once, wanted them to show him whether they were truly worthy. I could see it.

"I'll provide you with accommodation for now. So, please relax."

Vincent's expression and attitude remained polite. Whatever the northerners' feelings toward the southerners, they could not pretend that they did not appreciate the goodwill and toil of those who had come rushing to their aid.

"If you don't rest now, I don't know when you will be able to rest again."

Of course, Vincent spoke politely, but he couldn't help but add a slight barb in the end.

* * *

Winter Castle was a large fortress, but it was still a tight squeeze to accommodate nearly 10,000 troops. Once the reinforcements sent by the royal family arrived, all facilities of the fortress were filled to the limit. The barracks were stuffed with troops. And in such a cramped state, the lords of the north were still sending supplies. Among these supplies were those that came from the central region, sent by Count Brandenburg – who kept the Iron Hawk Archers – as well as other central nobles who had fought upon the Rhinethes.

The damage inflicted upon their forces in the last war was so great that they could not send troops in support, but they did send letters that they held the north and their struggles deep within their hearts.

Perhaps because of such unexpected goodwill and friendship, the rangers expelled from their barracks did not complain.

“Northerners never ill-treat their guests.”

They were willing to give their beds to their guests, for doing so played into the pride of the northerners. However, there was a limit to how much cold the northerners would suffer due to their pride.

“Ah, why are you in here!?” I exclaimed, and Ranger Company Commander Jordan gaped at me.

“Your accommodation is so spacious, so what says I to myself and the lads? People have to make concessions, innit?”

I tried to wrap my head around Jordan’s response. Even if it weren’t for this, the presence of the Overlord and concerns about the future would still hurt my head. Now that Jordan and other senior rangers were in my rooms… the pain became a torment.

“You guys, go the count!” I commanded.

“The lads who went to him first have already gotten settled in. And with the count… his nagging is getting worse these days, so it’s better to sleep in a tent than to stay with the count.”

I unintentionally expressed sympathy with Jordan’s words.

“There are other commanders too!” I then exclaimed.

“It’s all the same. They’re all full. So just give up already.”

I was annoyed by Jordan’s disrespectful response, but of course, that didn’t mean that I really wanted them out of my rooms. I still held affection for them. Then I saw Jordan’s face, and I realized something.

“But you are a company commander! You’re no longer a platoon leader. You have your own, separate accommodation, so why are you here?”

Jordan flinched and began trembling.

“My… My room was handed over to the new southern lads right away.”

And yet, somehow, he was still making excuses. I knew Jordan had his reasons.

Eventually, I could no longer endure the bustle, so I left my room.

“Where are you going!” exclaimed Jordan.

“It’s cramped in here. I’m going to get some air.”

“Please go carefully!”

I could only shake my head at the rangers who saw me off from my own room. As I left my room, a chill ran through my body. Adelia, who appeared like a ghost, handed me a fur coat. I wasn’t that surprised, for I had sensed her existence from the moment she neared me. What surprised me was that she, a Sword Master, still served me like a maid.

“You don’t have to do this anymore.”

She shook her head at me, which meant: “It’s because I like it, so don’t stop me.”

I suddenly became curious.

“Adelia, what do you usually do?”

I couldn’t guess what she did while I was away. Arwen practiced her swordsmanship, and Bernardo Eli followed Arwen. Vincent conducted his duties as count, and everyone else lived their own lives.

Adelia – Adelia was alone.

“I don’t do anything. That way, I can come right away if your Highness calls.”

As expected… her answer was as expected.

I was glad that she was willing to spend the entire day awaiting my call. But at the same time, she must’ve felt cramped, to be vaguely waiting for me to call her, each and every day.

Even I, who had once been a sword, wanted to do something with my time, and I wanted to enjoy it. I could not imagine spending all my time waiting for the moment to serve someone else.

“Rather, during that time…” I was trying to suggest something, but when I saw Adelia staring at me, I paused because I realized that my words to her would be taken as orders, not a suggestion.

“Is there anything you want?” was all I managed to ask Adelia.

“I want to have your Highness to live in comfort, and I want to prevent your Highness from getting hurt, and your Highness must…”

As she kept on talking, her words blurred in my mind. I stared at Adelia long and hard, and then, the answer I had sought finally left her mouth.

“…I want to see my family.”

Her entire family lived in the capital. Her younger brother was brimming with intelligence, so Niccolo had taken him on as a pupil. Adelia could see them any time she wanted.

“If you want to, even now, you can go see your family,” I suggested once more.

“Now, isn’t it more important that I be at your Highness’s side?” Adelia said with a somewhat remorseful face as she bowed her head. In the end, I was the cause of it. Adelia never left me, and I couldn’t leave Winter Castle.

When I asked her if there was anything else, she said that that was all.

I was deep in thought, then said after a while, “Let’s make some time for you.”

I encouraged Adelia to spend her time wisely and live for herself, and I wished that my needs would not be a fetter to her. She replied that she would do so, her face vague.

“I bet you will forget what I told you the moment I turn around, and then you’ll be waiting for me all day.”

She glared at me with a cramped face, and I felt sorry. Adelia was a sore sight.

Eli grunted, saying that I favored her too much, but I had to: While others reached their goals through me, only Adelia was living a life contrary to her own wishes. I still so clearly remember what she had said when she was drunk. She asked me why I was harassing her, why I wouldn't let her go, because she just wanted to live happily with her family. What importance did the title of Sword Master hold to Adelia? It would be enough for her to live with her aunt and younger brother.

"Adelia, let's invite your family to the palace when this war is over, and we return to the capital."

I had to return to the palace regardless, after this war. Such were the conditions the king had set to me, for he was in a hurry to schedule the ceremony. If the king got a bad feeling, he was like that.

I had to return right after my work was done here.

One of the reasons the Nogisa and the palace knights followed me here was to force me to return to the capital if I tried to disappear or sat too long in Winter Castle.

"So let's eat together and be properly introduced," I told Adelia.

"Together?"

"Huh. Together."

"…Yes, your Highness," came Adelia's usual mode of answering me. However, she couldn't hide her excitement.

I sighed and headed outside.

The fortress was preparing for an impending battle. Infantrymen were groaning as they carried heavy cannon shells, and the knights were going around the castle to see if there were any breaches or weak spots in the defenses. The rangers on duty stuck to walls as the wind blew, and they only stared out at the distant mountains.

Suddenly, one of them raised his hand.

"It's a monster!"

Just as he said this, horns rang out from all across the walls, and the urgent sound of

a ringing bell was heard from a spire.

‘Dang~! Dang~! Dang~!’

Troops poured out from inside the fortress, and among them were Jordan and the senior rangers who had been crashing in my room.

I climbed the wall with them, and one after the other, the commanders of Winter Castle appeared on the wall as well.

“Are you here already?” asked Vincent.

“I was just taking a walk,” came my rough reply as I looked out across the snowfield.

Monsters were pouring out endlessly from the mountains.

10,000; 20,000…

“Well.”

And then they reached 30,000.

“They keep coming out!”

The number of monsters pouring from the mountains showed no sign of decreasing. Vincent and his knights all wore hard faces, harder than normal. The entire snowfield was filled with monsters.

And it wasn’t a bunch of beasts mixed in a random jumble – Goblin troops were gathered beneath the green banners, orcs under red banners, and the trolls and ogres under blue and yellow banners, respectively.

They had all gathered under banners, not as a horde of monsters, but as an army. Orcs broke through the massed ranks of monsters and made their way to the front. Among them was an extraordinarily huge orc who raised a huge banner. The red flag spread itself out in the rough wind, and the symbol upon it was revealed: Black flames roaring upon a red background. It was the banner of the Enraged Flame Legion.

In ancient times, before the end of the war, this was the nightmare that had trampled

over countless castles as they roved across the world. And the master of that nightmare legion appeared.

Half of its body was somewhat melted, as if under some great fire, and an eerie red light flowed from its eyes: Urdu, a fierce monster who has survived hellish flames.

The Overlord, mounted atop an abnormally gigantic griffon, looked down upon Winter Castle.

CHAPTER 162
THE ROARING LIONS OF THE NORTH (1)

Count Schmilde Stuttgart, Nogisa, had been recognized for his talent with the sword from a young age, joining the palace knights early in his life. Since that time, he grew steadily and gained completion at age thirty-five, becoming the youngest palace knight commander in Leonberg's history.

Many knights praised his talent and accomplishment, but some of them dismissed him for being unstable, all due to the relatively smooth manner in which things had flown throughout his life.

They mocked him as a flower in the garden cultivated by the king, a flower who has lived a life of luxury in the palace without knowing true hardship.

Contrary to popular opinion, Schmilde's life was never a smooth ride, without sharp curves in the road.

He spent all his youth fighting against the imperial machinations aiming to make Leonberg a scarecrow kingdom. Even in Nogisa's laters years, could he not rest for a single day while he faced the empire's schemes.

Schmilde had never truly known a good night's sleep.

The number of assassins and grotesques he had defeated during those tough years had been in their hundreds, and it wasn't enough for the old man to be called a mere champion.

However, now Count Stuttgart's indomitable spirit was shaken by a horde of monsters that flocked onto the snowfield and by the hideous monstrosity mounted upon the griffon.

The foe exceeded Schmilde's expectations – A monster whose mere presence was of an incalculable scale.

Shivers ran along the old knight's skin. The battle has not begun, yet those tens of

thousands of monsters crouched upon the snowfield while the beast upon the griffon looked down on Winter Castle.

How could they beat this? Nogisa felt as helpless as if he had returned to the time when he had first encountered imperial assassins.

But he soon made up his mind: Just as the lords and knights of Winter Castle held their pride in the protection of the north, so too Nogisa was proud in doing his duty and protecting the royal family.

He couldn't deny such a duty, even if faced with such a monster.

Nogisa looked at the prince, who he had tutored when the boy was young before the prince had embraced baser talents and fallen into the lowliest of natures. It wasn't just Nogisa: Everyone attached to the prince had been thrown to the wayside at the time. Even the boy's father hated his son, persecuted him, and contemplated banishing him from the palace.

It was no exaggeration to say that the prince's childhood was marked by contempt and hatred.

All had feared that disaster would strike the kingdom was this prince to ascend to the throne. They figured that the moment he ascended, the hatred and anger that had ruled his childhood would sweep over the kingdom.

But it did not turn out so – the prince, as if beholding that future himself, shrugged off his hatred and contempt. Then he subjugated the harsh and desperate northern lords and earned the hearts of the high-ranking knights of the kingdom.

In this process, he showed aptitude in behaving like the ambassadors of the empire and even banished the imperial shadows that had crawled through the royal palace itself.

The prince was now indispensable to the kingdom.

"It doesn't matter that you're going to be far away from me. The kingdom needs him more than me at this time."

The king had also judged it to be so and finally persuaded Nogisa, who insisted upon staying at his side.

“Now that that child is the future of the kingdom, he is the kingdom itself. Makes sure that the reckless child does not reach out too far and plunge into the abyss.”

Nagisa’s head grew cold as soon as he recalled the king’s request, yet his heart still beat with warmth.

The king ordered him to protect the future of the kingdom, and that command was enough.

Nogisa gripped the hilt of his sword.

By his own judgment, his energy would not be enough to end the presence of that great monster, for, in the face of such a monstrous presence, the four rings he were so proud of were as nothing.

However, the royal knight wasn’t here to win, so staying back was enough.

‘Shhlkp~’ the sound of a sword drawn from its scabbard pierced Nogisa’s ears, and it was not the sound of his sword, which remained sheathed.

‘Pwooo~’ a brilliant golden glow spread over the castle walls. Nogisa turned his head to find the source of the auspicious light and found it to emanating from the sword of the prince’s dearest confidant.

She was Adelia Bavaria, a newly-born champion of the kingdom.

At first sight, Nogisa had thought that she was a woman who could not be seen as a champion, rather one who would be nicely dressed as she strolled through the palace instead of standing upon the field of battle with her sword drawn. She had not made a big impression upon him, yet he had figured that her gentle nature and figure matched the prince well.

However, this delicate woman, who the Nogisa had thought of in that manner, had drawn her sword before anyone else.

`Wooo~’ and another flash broke out, this time from Arwen Kirgayen.

Men had been groaning and chewing their lips under the enormous presence of the monster – these men now drew their blades and pointed them at the beast above.

Nogisa saw men jutting out their chins and wriggling their eyebrows in defiance.

“Damn, but you got an ugly face,” said Bernardo Eli as he drew his sword and pointed it at the sky. The pale glow of his blade spread across the walls.

That was the beginning.

‘Cheolkup~’ Nogisa unsheathed his sword as well.

He hesitated no further; rather, great anticipation was added to the blade in his heart, which had become dull as he entered old age.

The metaphorical blade of his entire life was gathered upon the edge of his sword. A great white light erupted and wrapped itself over the wall. And so, each of the four masters aimed their swords at the monster that hovered above the walls.

The beast’s anger made his skin tingle, so Nogisa rotated his rings with even greater velocity and ferocity. The fresh white light of his blade spread deeper and farther. The other three masters each accelerated their hearts or rings, responding to Nogisa’s rising energy.

The air grew tight with tension, with a balance that seemed as if it would collapse at any moment.

Nogisa drew energy into him with the belief that it would be acceptable were he to die here today.

His back was damp and wet with sweat, and the frigid, stormy weather attacked his body. Nevertheless, the old man resisted the beast above by accelerating his rings rather than driving away the chill.

How much time had passed?

It may not have been long, yet the Nogisa felt as if he had stood there for several hours without end.

The personage who the old knight had to protect stepped forward, and he started to speak in an unfamiliar, non-human language.

“…” it was a ferocious sound as if an orc was growling. What language was it, and

what did it mean? Nogisa did not know, yet he could see that the utterance of those words had made the beast above very angry, for the monster upon the griffon now opened his mouth wide.

But before a roar could burst from its maw- “Fire!” ‘Doof!’

The Count of Winter Castle gave the order, and a great roar rang out as Nogisa saw the unidentified iron cylinders placed all along the walls spew fire.

Black missiles arced through the air, and the great griffon hurriedly flapped its wings to escape their trajectory. The shells fell to the earth, their fiery flight in vain. In the meantime, an arrow flew from somewhere and pierced into the griffon’s shoulder. The winged beast screeched and pirouetted in pain, with the orc atop grabbing onto the griffon’s neck as he was rocked back and forth.

The dignity of the beast that had so arrogantly looked down upon Winter Castle existed no longer. Now there was just a monster sitting upon a flying best, struggling not to fall from the thing.

‘Uuh uh uh uh!’ the monster roared.

“Prepare for battle!” shouted the prince.

The monsters upon the snowfield had begun to roar and surge forward, all at once.

Rangers grabbed their bows and crossbows, and the heads of the screaming metal devices were lowered.

‘Dum dum dum dum dum!’ the ground shook as that vast horde charged, and the snow that had gathered upon the walls fell down under that vibration.

“Respond!” came a harsh shout, and rangers let loose crossbow bolts and arrows.

‘Sasasasasak~’ thousands of arrows blanketed the sky.

‘Krsh!’ a portion of the monsters collapsed as death pierced into them from the air.

However, these diminished lines were quickly filled by monsters pushing in from the rear.

“Target the ones with the ladders and ropes!”

“Ignore the big ones! They’ll get stuck anyway!”

Rangers yelled out to each other all along the wall, and the sound of bowstrings being drawn and then twanging echoed all over.

“I’ll cover the west!”

“Then I’ll take the east!”

The newest and greatest champions of the kingdom spread their brilliant light as they ran across the walls.

The knights of Winter Castle stood upon the walls, bearing shields.

“Ha!”

In the next instant, a great many missiles were thrown from under the walls.

‘Klnng!’ the roar of their impact echoed all over, yet none of the stones and spears thrown by the monsters so much as crossed the wall.

“Ha!” the knights cried once more as they swung their shields, beating back wolves and their orcish riders who had tried to leap onto the wall. Beasts and riders both plunged earthward.

Large monsters, several meters tall, roared as they threw axes and stones.

The knights with shields crouched down, and the knights from the second line leapt onto the backs and shoulders of those before them.

‘Wooo~!’ an unusual brilliance shone on their swords: Sword auras of those with at least three rings.

‘Swkng!’ the jumping knights blocked the monsters’ attack and leaped back in quick succession, with the knights of the first row once more standing, shields raised. Behind them, the other knights were removing the corpses of their fallen companions from the wall.

The rangers did not budge, even though the rocks fragmented under their very noses as the knights shattered them or bounced them back. The same counted when the wolves climbed onto the walls, striking out with their slavering maws.

The rangers just fired arrows like machines, and the knights protected them.

“Ah,” Nogisa admired the defensive strategy as he watched it unfold.

It was an unfamiliar sight, for Nogisa had never heard of nor seen a scenario where precious knights fought like common soldiers. He had never seen knights risk their bodies for the sake of protecting soldiers, as they did here. Nogisa was impressed by the manner in which they took the initiative, yet at the same time, he was concerned, knowing that the knights would be the first ones to tire.

The knights had to maintain an optimal level of power at every moment. In that way, Nogisa could step out and do his part, as was required of him.

That was common sense, but it didn’t take long for Nogisa’s conception of common sense to shatter.

The knights of Winter Castle did not tire; they were like iron men. Then the prince came up to Nogisa and explained it to him as if he had read his inner thoughts.

Once the battle begins, the Knights of Winter Castle have to fight for a few weeks up to several months.

Naturally, they have no choice but to learn how to use their energy efficiently and how to quickly recover exhausted stamina.

Nogisa spat out his doubt. Sure, there was no way to grow a knight faster than through a battle as the current one, so Winter Castle was the perfect proving ground for them. However, no matter how efficiently they manage their energy, the mana of the knights was bound to be limited. And once the knights upon the wall fell, there would be a vacuum in defensive power that the monsters would exploit.

“Don’t the knights on the wall then, in reality, suppress their energy?” asked Nogisa.

The prince smiled as he looked back along the wall. “Not as such, no. Ah, it’s time for the turn change,” said the prince, almost to himself, and the Nogisa did not understand.

“Line shift!” came the order from Count Balahard.

“Ha!” The knights who had fought fiercely with the monsters in the front ranks now stepped back, and the knights behind them took up shields and swords, stepping out to take their comrades’ places.

Nogisa’s eyes stretched wide. He didn’t try to conduct an exact count, but by rough estimate, about four-hundred had retreated from the front ranks with the same amount taking their place.

This was incomprehensible for the old man – he had heard that there were less than five hundred knights gathered here from the northern region and that a significant number of them had been sacrificed in the latest charge into the rampaging monsters. It was a historical moment, to have almost a thousand knights present, and the second prince had confirmed it before the Nogisa left the capital.

“Shouldn’t you reduce the power and report?” the Nogisa asked Prince Maximilian at the time.

The prince replied by saying it wasn’t very important.

“Because there are imperial spies everywhere,” he had then stated, and Nogisa had paused for a while, and then broken out into laughter.

These knights could not exist after the imperial pressures bore down upon the kingdom, so they were all disbanded, and the Kingdom of Leonberg became a toothless lion.

Everyone said that the day would never be seen when the northern lion would roar once more, and Nogisa had also secretly thought so. But it didn’t turn out that way.

A new history of Leonberg was beginning here, in this cold land that so few knew of. And this new history was so glorious and splendid, unlike the past hundred years which had been marked by humiliation and defeat.

The thrilled Nogisa’s face was flushed, and he looked at the prince.

“It’s not over yet,” came the prince’s words, and the air became heated. At first: A small ember and then many embers grew to become fiery fists, and these formed into balls of flame bigger than human heads. And at last, fireballs flew into the

monsters.

'Fwoosh~!' and the small fireballs exploded into big flares, with the flames reaching out several meters to either side.

Flames erupted all over, and the burning monsters roared and ran riot.

"It seems that quite a few of the children sent by the nobles had talent enough to become wizards."

Nogisa's eyes widened as he watched the flames, a magical fire that has not been manifested for a hundred years since the empire sealed Leonberg's tower.

It was combat magic, through and through, and Nogisa was thrilled by the flaming sight of it. The prince drew his sword and stepped forward. The three masters who had dispersed themselves across the wall to slay monsters now stood behind him.

Nogisa was overwhelmed by these new champions, for they had reached completion before the age that he had done so, some even ten years before his thirty-five. They did not notice the gaze of the old knight, as they were talking among themselves.

"He will appear soon," said the prince.

"Already?" asked Bernardo Eli as he tilted his head.

"We just lit a fire in front of a being whose game it is to ignite eternal fires, so he won't back down after our challenge."

The prince's statement was unintelligible to Nogisa, and the other champions also seemed befuddled. Then the prince's face suddenly had a questioning appearance to it, and Bernardo asked something as if he had just remembered.

"But… what did you say earlier?"

"I didn't say much. Just…" replied the prince in an awkward tone, pausing.

"It is said that he pretends to be proud about the fact that he is the waste that Hwaryong chewed upon and then spat out."

CHAPTER 163
THE ROARING LIONS OF THE NORTH (2)

“If you have cursed this one so, will the others not charge out of anger?”

I was asked if my insult had been universal to all orcs, and I shook my head.

The majority of orcs here never had so much as seen the shadow of the Fire Dragon, so to them, my words had been naught but incomprehensible bullshit. Any orc that survived a fight with the fire dragon would be rather proud of it, as fighting a mighty enemy made any orc chuffed, even if they were defeated.

However, the Overlord had been angered by my words as if he had received the gravest of insults. If he had been truly lucky to survive a battle against Hwaryong, there would be no reason for my words to make him mad. So this was how I discovered how the Overlord truly survived battling against the fire dragon: It was obvious that he had fled in terror from Hwaryong, and that was something that a proud greenskin should never do, even more so if he’s the leader of an army.

“But you must still be worried,” said Ophelia, saying that how the warlord had survived was not what was important now. She was correct, for the most important task now was to drive out those who have invaded my territory. That said, I couldn’t help but ponder on it: If the Overlord possessed special abilities that I was unaware of, which had helped him to survive against the fire dragon, I had to know of them.

But such thoughts were tiring, and I concluded that the Overlord survived not because he was special, but because he had hidden behind others and run away faster than them.

His reaction to my provoking words, his half-molten body: These were all evidence.

If a commander of giants properly came under the flaming breath of Hwaryong, it melted until nothing was left, so the Overlord would not be in the shape he was in now had he been brave.

And as such concerns were cleared from my mind, I was able to focus on the battle at

hand.

“This war,” I muttered as I looked at the knights around me. “Kill the leader and finish it.”

Bernard Eli wagered that it would not be as simple as I had declared, for the number of monsters gathered upon the snowfield was great indeed.

At his words, I gave a bloody laugh.

“With one Sword Master, you can block an advancing legion. If you have two Masters, you can break through the encirclement. Add one more, and you become able to destroy the entire legion.”

And here were five Sword Masters, not three. The number of enemies we faced was too large to be destroyed, but it would not be difficult to break through the ranks of monsters.

I looked at my knights: Arwen stood sturdy without trembling. Adelia was wiggling her sword as if about to charge out immediately, and Eli was filled with excitement.

And I didn’t know why, but the old man was in a better mood than he had been in a while ago. It was possible to defeat the Overlord with them, but there was one problem: After having been under intense fire from cannons and crossbows, the Overlord went and hid himself. I did not feel his fervor, nor the energy signature so peculiar to him. I had offered him irresistible insults, and we had even goaded him by lighting fires, but Urdu still seemed to have no intention of showing even the tip of his nose.

I decided that it was enough, as I was now sure that the Overlord had hidden.

“I thought that, because he had survived the battle with Hwaryong, he must be very talented,” I mused, now seeing the truth, for an Overlord hiding behind his minions was an even more embarrassing creature.

“I have to wait and see.”

First off, the number of monsters upon the snowfield had to be reduced to some extent. That way, the Masters and I would be able to reach the Overlord while still preserving some of our energy.

I knew that if I went through that large army as it was now, at best, I would be exhausted and killed by Urdu once I reached him.

I decided to wait, and so a day passed, and two days more.

Winter Castle's forces proved surprisingly adept at defending against the monsters.

The Overlord still did not appear on the front lines, and another two days passed.

The tide of monsters was endless. Even if we slaughtered them all night long, the monsters crawling out of the mountains quickly filled the gaps we had created.

Monster carcasses crushed by cannonballs were scattered all over the snowfield, as well as those torn apart by arrows, bolts, and magic. The carcasses of the monsters who had died under the swords and shields of the knights had formed a mountain beneath the wall.

The monsters were now gaining the wall without difficulty as they stepped upon this mound of corpses.

The Masters had been dispersed all over to counter the assaults of the larger monsters, and the knights took turns in supporting them.

Winter Castle was truly impregnable, and even now that twice than 50,000 monsters were pressing upon the fortress, the defenders seemed able to block their attack.

Nevertheless, the battle was not over.

Once the monsters grew hungry, they would eat the carcasses of their own kind that littered the snowfield, and then retreat and sleep. And while they did so, the monsters swarming out of the mountain would charge at the wall. Their numbers were truly ridiculous. It was as if not only all the monsters of the Blade's Edge Mountains but also those of Mount Seori had come here. It was a great army that reached 100,000 by rough estimate.

Still, considering the number of those in the Enraged Flame Legion that the Overlord had mobilized in the Great War, the current force seemed paltry in comparison. At that time, only the Elite War Legion alone numbered in their hundreds of thousands.

However, this was not the time of the Great War.

The Overlord has just newly reappeared, and the dark green waves that had once swept over the world existed no more. The term 'Prosperous Greenskin Kingdom' was now an anachronism.

The problem was that the same counted for our side. Winter Castle's power was now greater than it had ever been in history, but it was still inferior to the might of the elite fortresses of the ancient humans. As time passes, humanity will regain its glory, but it will not be an instant process.

And the Overlord seemed unwilling to wait until humans regained their might. Maybe that's why the cunning Urdu has appeared so hastily in the world: Before the legion of man regained their ancient castles.

If I was Urdu, I would also have seen it: The fact that the heroes of old, who had once blocked the paths of the orcish war legions, existed no more.

So he believed humanity would be easy to trample upon.

Urdu has made an obvious mistake and a very big mistake.

Here were thick-boned and stout-armed knights and soldiers, battling monsters. Here were wonders that those elite fortresses of the ancient front line did not know of, and it would not be easy to find troops as experienced as these even in the Great War.

And I filled the final missing part, so what we had was enough. I wagered that the country of Leonberg didn't even exist in the Overlord's calculations.

And his first spell of bad luck was the fact that I arrived at the castle on the very day that he chose to reveal his existence. His second stroke of bad luck was the fact that he had chosen to invade my land from among all the other human realms. Now I was just looking for the opportunity, awaiting the coming of the ideal moment.

But time passed, and Overlord Urdu did not show up. All he did was urge his legions of monsters to crash against the walls of Winter Castle, day and night.

Winter Castle's troops gradually got tired. Their morale and fighting spirit was still there, but there was no way to circumvent their physical limitations.

The way in which the monsters fought was true evil: They did not distinguish

between day and night and never reformed their lines. If a weary monster fell behind, rested, then a vigorous monster fresh from the mountains would charge at the wall and strengthen the assault.

And even at this moment, the mountain was vomiting forth more monsters.

More carcasses piled up, and ogres and trolls began to form a mound with monster corpses on the area of snow directly adjacent to the wall. The rangers fired arrows at once, in hopes to disturb such labor, but the large monsters did not care.

The mountain of carcasses had once reached only about halfway up the wall. It now grew high enough to overlook the ramparts themselves.

'Bwang!' combat wizards cast fireballs, tearing down the corpse mountain and burning some of the carcasses. However, due to the great number of dead monsters scattered upon the snow, the corpse mound was quickly rebuilt.

I was anxious, for I wanted to draw my sword and jump into the hordes of monsters right away.

I kept such impulses in check, for I knew that the moment I drew my sword would be the moment that the Overlord revealed himself.

"This is not like a normal war," said Vincent as he approached me.

"What?"

"We have to think differently in these battles. In the past, you would've already walked all over the wall and finally urged me to open the gates."

I could not deny his words.

"We will not be able to return to those old days, will we?" said Vincent with a bitter smile. "Now that you have become the Crown Prince, it is only natural that you rest your body. As before, if you now turn to the right or turn to the left, only your subordinates will suffer."

Before I could form a reply, Vincent spoke on.

"Trust in your servants," he said and pointed across the wall. Rangers were

constantly firing arrows, and the knights upon the walls were pushing back monsters.

Although they seemed tired, their faces were full of fighting spirit, and no fear was to be seen.

“Thank you.”

Only then did it sink into my mind: Winter Castle never submits.

And as soon as such confidence entered my heart, my impatience disappeared as if it had been an illusion. My once-narrowed vision was now clear and open. My gaze had been confined to the walls – now it roved over the snowfields and the mountains.

Only then did I realize: There were no new monsters pouring in from the mountains. The number of monsters that the Overlord could mobilize seemed to have peaked.

The battle continued as orcs rushed over the corpse mound piled against the wall. The number of monsters upon the wall was greater than at any prior time, and the rangers now wielded swords and spears instead of bows.

Knights slashed out in all directions as they stemmed the tide of onrushing monsters.

And just then, an old man knelt in front of me.

“Your Highness! Please allow the troops of the Central Army and the Knights of the Palace to participate in the war!”

There was no reason for me to hesitate, and when I nodded, Nogisa jumped up and fired off an order to the palace knight behind him.

“Push the enemy out with the Central Army!”

“Ha!” the palace knight gave a brief salute and headed down the wall.

Shortly thereafter, he reappeared with the heavy infantry of the royal family behind him. They were garbed in red cloaks and their bodies fully armored in iron armor, which the troops of Winter Castle did not prefer due to the freezing iron sticking to their bodies.

‘Chuck, chuck, chuck~’

The heavy sound of footsteps reverberated all over the walls, not matching the tumult that was playing out in battle. The heavy infantry formed themselves up in a single rank behind the rangers.

The heavy infantry did not budge an inch, for even as curses and shouts rang out before them, and as blood flowed, they merely held out their shields and breathed roughly.

“Your Highness, you used to resent the fact that his Majesty was helpless, with his power taken away,” Nogisa, who guarded over me, suddenly said after he had given orders to the palace knights. “But his Majesty did not have all his might removed.”

The Central Army moved before I could respond to the words of the old knight, words so calm that they did not fit the situation.

“Shield wall!”

“Ha!”

Two thousand central troops raised their shields at once from where they stood at the rear of the cramped wall.

‘Shud!’ their footsteps were far heavier than the lighter tread of the rangers.

“Advance!”

“Ha!”

Heavy infantrymen pushed forward with their shields held in front of them.

“Shields aside!”

At the command of the palace knights, heavy infantrymen turned their shields aside and grabbed onto the necks of rangers.

‘Ochk!’ choked one, startled.

“Bastards!” cried a ranger.

“These mad lads!” exclaimed another.

Rangers cussed and swore and cursed as they were hurled back.

“Close!” and meanwhile, the heavy infantry which has surged forward brought their shields to the fore once more.

‘Shkk!’ even if two thousand shields had moved, they emitted a single sound, so precise was the maneuver.

It was a rare sight to behold. The monsters fiercely roared as they charged at the shield wall.

‘Thud!’ the heavy infantrymen braced themselves at once as the monsters’ blows rained down upon their shields.

‘Klshh!’ the ranks of heavy infantry staggered back, yet there was not a single gap. The sturdiness of these troops was far superior to the central heavy infantry that had fought in defense of the Rhinethes.

‘Schtuck!’ the infantry angled their shields, and their swords slashed out at once through the gaps they had created.

‘Aoow!’ the monsters struck by the swords cried out – and that was all. It is not easy to inflict fatal injuries, to cleave through the tough, leathery hides of the monsters. Not many monsters fell to mortal wounds under the infantry’s counterstrikes.

The surviving monsters rallied, and their attacks grew fiercer, fueled by the pain of their wounds.

‘Dshoo! Dshoo!’

And then, hundreds of roaring explosions sounded out, and the monsters facing the shield wall were felled at once.

“Here is the true reason for his Majesty’s desire for a fellowship with the dwarves,” came Nogisa’s voice into my battered ears.

“Here is one of the secret weapons, the unbroken sword that the royal family has kept hidden.”

This was the thing that had caught my eye: The heavy infantry had hooked iron cylinders over their shields.

“That is the Royal Heavy Armored Squadron,” continued Nogisa.

The acrid smell of gunpowder broke right into my nose.

CHAPTER 164
THE ROARING LIONS OF THE NORTH (3)

I stared at the ranked infantry with a blank face, even though the cylindrical weapons that were hooked upon the edges of their shields were guns I'd already seen before.

In the distant past, when orcs and giants, faeries and dwarves ruled the world, there existed elite armies representative of each race.

For the greenskin race, there was the 'Enraged Flame Legion.'

The giants had the 'Lighting and Thunderbolt Corps.'

They were the 'Death Dance and Song Corps' for the faeries.

And the dwarves had the 'Boiling Iron Legion.'

The elite gunners of the latter, dwarven force had used the same long-barreled hakenbusche, or hook guns, that the royal infantry had now fixed tightly to their shields. The only difference was that the hand cannons used by the dwarves were much stronger, and they supported them not with huge rectangular shields but rather on large battleaxes.

It was something I couldn't understand, for even if the dwarves traded their hand cannons more readily than their artillery cannons, it was not something that they traded on such large a scale to other races.

But, whether I understood it or not, what the royal soldiers held was the genuine article, even if the shapes of the weapons were too crude for them to have been forged by dwarves, and with their firepower being incomparable to the original design.

'Doof!'

While I stared on with a vacant face, the handguns of the heavily armored warriors

once more blew fire from their muzzles, and the monsters beyond the shield wall collapsed.

'Chuck,' while the monsters staggered back and hesitated for a while, half of the heavily armored arquebusiers retreated to the rear rank. The remaining arquebusiers laid down their shields horizontally to fill the gaps left by their comrades.

'Cheolkup,' the arquebusiers who had stepped back were quick of hand as they shook something from pouches and loaded it into the muzzles of their guns with surprising swiftness, and once they were done with this task, they returned to the front rank.

'Doof! Doof!'

The hand cannons of the warriors who had just returned once more spat fire, and as the monsters stumbled back, the other half of the arquebusiers fell back to reload.

It took them only tens of seconds to angle their guns, remove and then insert something, and return to the front rank.

Those who had already reloaded fired while their comrades readied their guns for another volley. This scene was repeated several times, yet it was clear that the heavily armored squadron, despite their overwhelming firepower, couldn't completely stop the monsters.

There was a great crisis they had to contend with: The larger monsters rushed on even after being shot by the hand cannons.

It was at that time that the knights came to the fore. The heavily armored arquebusiers opened the shield barrier, and the palace knights killed the large monsters before falling back again, with the shield wall closing after their withdrawal.

This process flowed so naturally, with consummate ease.

The troops of Winter Castle had been skeptical of how much power the support forces from the capital could bring to bear, as they had no actual combat experience. These northern soldiers now loudly exclaimed their praise, but not everyone was so admiring of the reinforcements.

“How long will I need to hold my men back and just let them watch!?” came the fierce cry from Vincent.

And in the next moment, the knights of Winter Castle, who had retreated to regain their energy, headed for the front line all at once.

‘Chuck!’ the heavily armored arquebusiers opened up their barrier as if they had eyes on the back of their heads.

The knights passed through the gaps and started to run wild. Their energy had been exhausted before, yet it now shone so clearly upon their blades. They had regained their reserves in the short period of rest granted to them. The courageous orcs couldn’t best the knights’ swords and were swept away, and the large, ferocious monsters spouted blood and fell as the knights slashed into them.

The soldiers of Winter Castle shouted, and the arquebusiers struck upon their shields, the sharp metallic sound echoing across the wall.

‘Woow~’ the keening of swords rang out from everywhere.

‘Buwoo! Buwoo! Buwoo woo!’ and that’s when the horn sounded.

“The reinforcements are here!”

It seemed as if the end of the world had come beyond the wall, but I now looked beneath it.

‘Chuck~ Chuck~ Chuck~’

A group of troops appeared with heavy footsteps. They were dwarves, dappled in shadows by the hooded capes that they wore. One dwarf in the lead threw back the hood of his cloak and exclaimed, “Prince! It’s been a long time!”

“Meister Surkara!”

He was indeed Meister Surkara, who had visited Winter Castle along with Prima Meister Turka.

“I came to give you the aid of my arms!”

I greeted the dwarves with a bright smile, for I had not expected their participation in the battle.

“You’re right on time, Meister! If you came but a little later, there would be almost nothing left for the dwarves to fight!”

Surkara laughed and said, “Thank you for that, prince! We dwarves do prefer live orcs more than dead orcs. That way, we get to slay the buggers!”

After saying this, Surkara led the dwarves onto the wall.

“Prepare to open your shields!”

With the words spoken beneath the wall serving as greeting enough, the dwarves now pulled out their axes, screamed, and rushed right into the fray.

‘Chuck!’ the arquebusiers raised their shields high, and two-hundred dwarves charged out at once, their stout bodies hurtling through the gap opened by the royal infantry.

‘Swchka!’ the dwarves started swinging their axes left and right.

‘Schoop!’ ‘Kaa-Ahk!’ the monsters who had their legs severed fell screaming.

The dwarves leaped onto and split open the skulls of the fallen monsters.

It started in earnest from that point on as two hundred dwarves madly cut down monsters.

Hack, slash, split, and slash again – the dwarves cared not to defend themselves, for the crude blades of the orcs could not so much as scratch dwarven armor and helms.

‘Dong!’ the blows landed by the orcs bounced off the armor.

“You green shits!”

“Away with you, smelly bastards!”

The angry dwarves were inevitably out for revenge.

‘Aaah!’ the screams of monsters sounded from all over.

“For Winter Castle!” came Vincent’s fierce roar. “Leave the minimum number of troops to defend the walls! All, on the offensive!”

The gate ground open with a great roar, and the Black Lancers, lined up and fully armed, charged from the castle gate at once.

And at their forefront was the descendant of Gallohard. Gallohard, a Blood Lion whose horsemanship was legendary, said to be close to that of the gods themselves.

There he was: Gallahan Gallohard.

‘Schwaak!’ and the moment that Gallahan charged through the castle gates, a wild wind raged. It was the poem of the Gallohard family, [The Poetry of Flurry].

Gallahan became like those humans of old as he readied his lance and charged with the force of that splitting wind into the densely packed monsters who were not given a second’s time to step out of his path.

“Don’t fall behind the rookies!” the one-eyed Quéon roared as he supported Gallahan from the rear. Arwen and Eli, who I had not seen leave the wall, were there as well. I watched as the dwarves leaped and hacked through the dark green waves, as they charged over the mounds of monster corpses piled high against the walls.

“Hey-ho!”

“Hab!”

The dwarves ensconced in their armor looked like huge iron balls, and wherever they passed, monsters screeched and fell as they became part of the piled carcasses.

The Winter Knights followed as they cut into the monsters that the dwarves had not dealt with.

“We can’t stand and watch, lads! Brothers of the North! With me!”

The knights and soldiers sent by the northern lords ran down the walls and through the gates, their spears and swords at the ready.

That dark green wave that had struck against the walls of Winter Castle now cracked and was split asunder.

The monsters began to stumble, stagger, and retreat.

Winter Castle's army pierced their swords and spears into the backs of fleeing monsters.

"Follow them!"

The excited knights were moving away from the castle.

"Come back!" I shouted at them with the full force of my mana.

Right then- 'Dum~ Dum~ Dum~ Dum~'

I heard the sound of war drums from the other side of the snowfield. The elite war legion of the orcs emerged, struggling through the monsters that were fleeing to the mountains in groups. At their forefront was a giant orc who held the banner of the Enraged Flame Legion.

"Smash through them!"

"Do not back down!"

The knights who saw the elite orcish army appear charged at them with fierce shouts.

'Oh oh oh oh!' orc guards and orc warriors ran to meet the knights face-to-face.

"Kill the things!"

"Let's finish it!"

The knights let their swords blaze bright.

'Orh waagh!'

'Ahhh!'

Each one of the orcs gathered red fervor into their axes and spears.

'Kngsclhak!' hundreds of brilliant swords collided with thousands of fervor-infused weapons.

"Aaah!" dozens of knights became sacks of ravaged flesh that flew through the air.

'Nrgaaah!' hundreds of orcs were battered back as their limbs were severed.

"Do not back down!"

"I will take the lead!"

Arwen and Eli slashed their swords in all directions as they crushed the lines of the orcish legion. Winter Knights and the soldiers of Winter Castle trampled over dead and dying orcs to kill some more.

"Vincent!" I shouted as I looked back at his spot. "The troops have gone too far! It's time for them to fall back!"

However, the seat of the count was empty.

"Count Balahard is out there with the Winter Knights," said a ranger as he pointed with his finger.

As I followed the direction in which he pointed, I saw the Winter Knights who had split apart the orc war legion, off in the distance. And at their forefront was Vincent, who was cutting down orcs like a madman.

I frowned. On the face of it, Vincent's judgment wasn't bad. He had taken advantage of the performance of the royal heavy armored squadron and the joining of the dwarves.

The impetus of the enemy was broken, and the momentum of our allied forces has soared to the ends of the sky.

It was a very reasonable judgment to expand that momentum and maximize the damage done to the monsters. It was also a proven tactic by now, to charge from the castle if the opportune moment presented itself.

In fact, it was obvious that our allies were dominating the battle.

The dwarves had fallen upon the center of the orcs like cannonballs, quickly hacking that solid fortress of ranked orcs into a gory mess. The knights led by Arwen and Eli were madly slaughtering the orcs from the flanks. The elite war legion was on the edge of rapidly collapsing without even being able to put up a decent fight. Everything was going well.

If things continued like this, we would surely be able to utterly break the enemy's momentum and scatter the monsters back into the mountains before the day was done.

However, I had a bad feeling.

"Ah-" and only moments later did I realize why I had such misgivings.

"Oh shit!" I spat out a curse.

"Everyone, fall back!" I shouted for them to retreat, channeling all the mana I could into my voice.

However, it was already too late.

"Oach!"

"Aahh!"

Screams erupted all through the ranks of the Allied Northern Forces that have charged from the gates.

Orcs popped out from under the snow, and these risen orcs began to cleave into the ranks with feral insanity.

Soldiers died all across the snowfield.

The dwarves and knights on the frontline did not know what was occurring in the rear, and they continued cutting down orcs.

"Come back!" I once more shouted with all my mana. However, the knights and dwarves still busied themselves with the enemies that faced them. I shouted with

enough mana for my voice to reach the very peaks of the mountains, yet they all acted as if they had not heard my voice.

Maybe they had decided that it was too late to retreat, or they believed it would be better to completely scatter the enemy and then fall back rather than attempting a forced retreat from within enemy lines.

“Even if they try to return, the Allied Northern Forces are blocking the retreat, locked in battle as they are!”

“You idiots!”

The rangers upon the wall shouted out to those on the snowfield.

The knights and soldiers of the Allied Northern Forces had become drunk with the martial spirit of Winter Castle – they had now been plunged into absolute confusion after the orcs had burst from the snow.

And the Winter Knights had to pass through the messy lines of their northern allies to reach the castle. It would not be easy.

“They should rather break the enemy’s backbone and then swivel back to marshal our Northern Allies!”

It was as the rangers said: This was a wiser course of action. And the knights and dwarves, with the great momentum they possessed, had the might to put such a plan into action.

Unless the Overlord showed up all of a sudden, nothing could halt the carnage of the dwarves and knights.

But it wasn’t just our allies who were looking for the ideal opportunity.

In the middle of a battlefield filled with the fervor of orc warriors, I sensed something. And Vincent and his knights were about to set foot on that patch of snow, that patch where something huge was hiding – a covert yet fierce entity, and very intimidating. It was the energy of the Overlord I had been seeking out for so long.

“Damn!” I judged what to do in a single moment as I sprang into a sprint, my sword already in my hand.

I watched as Vincent cut into orcs at random, and I ran. I ran hard.

Nogisa, his palace knights, and the royal infantry followed me, their goal being to aid the northern troops whose lines have been thrown into chaos. I kept sprinting ahead as I heard those behind scream relentlessly for the troops upon the snowfield to fall back.

“Vincent!”

When I finally reached the back of Vincent and his knights, they were passing over that hidden energy.

“You are late!” Vincent laughed as he looked back at me as if to make sure that he had heard my voice.

“Damn,” I swore to myself at Vincent’s carefree reaction as I charged at him.

‘Vgshoo!’ the snow exploded, and Vincent’s body was thrown into the air. I jumped over the knights before me and shortened the distance between myself and Vincent at once.

Vincent, who had seen the earth become sky before landing in the snow, looked up at me with wide eyes.

‘Krrssk~’ the pile of snow beneath him quavered and ‘Quap!’, a geat dark-green hand erupted from the snowdrift and reached for Vincent.

Vincent realized his peril a moment later and summoned light into his sword. However, his brilliant sword aura was scattered with ease in the face of the blooming fervor.

It all happened before I even reached the patch of snow, before I could even bring the power of my poetry to bear. In that slow passage of time, my eyes were wide open.

‘Sassak!’ It was then that a golden flash erupted from among the knights.

Adelia, my dear Adelia, pushed Vincent aside and struck out with her sword.

Urdu’s red fervor collided with that pure, golden blaze.

CHAPTER 165
THE ROARING LIONS OF THE NORTH (4)

Vincent knew better than anyone that he did not possess the talents of his father. However, he was not disappointed by this, for he was not a knight but a lord, and he had a job to do.

He thought that was enough.

Keeping his sword sheathed, wanting to beat the monsters back, he instead pressed the defense from the walls. It wasn't easy, but he was able to adapt, for these were the duties of the count.

But his mind was shaken up, as of late.

"Why is it so frustrating?"

At some point, his heart had started beating like crazy. Heat flared from inside him as if he had swallowed a fireball. His hand kept crawling to the hilt of his sword. The heat inside in him was too great, and he knew he had not fully rid himself of the instincts of a knight.

He held such feelings back, taking care not to give expression to them. Instead of a sword, he wielded a baton, and he was faithful to his role.

And then, thanks to the charge of the dwarves and the remarkable performance of the central army, there came to exist sufficient grounds for him, as count, to signal the advance.

He knew that if the piled mound of monster carcasses was not dealt with, then the defensive advantage of the wall was rendered useless.

The momentum of the enemy had to be broken before the damage inflicted upon the allies by the offensive became too great. Also, the prince had stated that the sooner the enemy leader was forced to reveal himself, the quicker this war would end.

And he figured that now was the opportune time, as all the reasons for an advance were met. So, Vincent switched to the offensive without hesitation. He thought it was a very reasonable and decent judgment.

However, his assumptions proved to be illusions.

In the distance, he heard the prince shout out several times, calling for a retreat.

The lieutenant next to Vincent informed him that the troops of the Allied Northern Forces had been thrust into confusion due to orcs suddenly bursting from the snow. He also told Vincent that the retreat was blocked off.

“After we smash through the enemy’s main force, we return!”

Most of the monsters had wheeled around and were fleeing. The only thing that stood in the way of the allies was the war legion of the orcs, which constituted only a small fraction of the whole.

Here was a rare opportunity to utterly crush the enemy’s main force.

Instead of retreating and joining up with the soldiers of the Allied Northern Forces, Vincent decided to scatter the enemy first and then fall back.

However, this judgment also proved to be in error.

“Vincent!” The prince had appeared late on the battlefield, and his face held a rare urgency. He leaped into the air as he raised his sword, and the next thing Vincent knew was that the world had become a blur.

Suddenly, a huge forearm exploded from the snow under his feet. Vincent wielded his sword with all his strength, but his sword aura was scattered with ease when faced with the red energy surrounding that great arm.

And faced with that vicious energy, Vincent finally realized the reality of the situation: What he had figured to be a reasonable judgment had merely been an excuse for rash action. It was all due to this vicious energy that the troops had so eagerly advanced from the walls; this energy was the cause for a lord of a castle to charge onto the battlefield.

Vincent only realized it now, and no time was allotted to him to regret it.

‘Shuck,’ someone pushed his body aside.

‘Wvshooo!’ and he saw a brilliant golden sword as he stumbled back, and a woman with lights of varying color in her eyes was wielding it.

‘Skwot!’ red fervor washed over the woman, seeming to devour her, and in the next instant, a great eruption of energy blossomed out. It sounded as if the sky itself was being torn apart.

‘Graahh!’ there was a roar, and everything occurred so quickly that Vincent couldn’t immediately judge what had happened to him as he rolled through the snow. When he snapped awake, he was lying on the snow and staring at the back of someone blocking off his front.

“You almost broke my heart,” an angry voice came into Vincent’s ears. “To lose one of you in vain is tragedy enough.”

Vincent’s mind flashed as he heard the prince’s reproachment. It was only then that he realized that he had fallen into the enemy’s trap and that the prince had saved his life just in time.

“Do not blame yourself,” said the prince, saying that none had known that the Overlord had hidden himself in the snow and that the fault was not Vincent’s that he had made multiple misjudgments and nearly charged to his self-destruction.

“And thanks to this, we were able to pull the guy out of hiding. Now leave the rest to me.”

A giant orc arose, towering over the prince. He was the King of the Orcs, his hideous body half-melted, and the prince stood tall while facing such a sinister, insidious being.

“Go, and command the knights. You have already drawn your sword, so now trample the foe thoroughly.”

Before Vincent could say anything, the prince shoved him back.

“Go now! Quickly!”

Vincent hesitated, for it felt as if his legs would not move. He knew not whether this

was out of concern for the prince or because of the unknown energy that constantly battered into him.

And then, Vincent gritted his teeth and followed the prince's orders.

"I will be back soon!" shouted the prince. "Hold on for a while!"

And with that said, the prince took a firm step to face his foe.

* * *

When I confirmed that Vincent was leaving, I sighed in relief. My heart sill thudded in my chest, for I had feared that I would lose Vincent as I had lost my uncle.

And I was filled with fear for dear Adelia as well, and also afraid that all the northern men gathered here would fall in vain. And I was surprised by such fears, for it felt as if all the blood had drained from my body. Yet Vincent lived, and Adelia was thrown aside but seemed unhurt.

The Allied Northern Forces in the rear were quickly stemming the chaos that had pounced them with the aid of Nogisa, his knights, and the royal infantry.

I was relieved, and this sense of relief soon turned into great wrath.

"You're truly divergent from the common nature of orcish kind," said I, for I couldn't imagine how such great king would hide himself in the snow in ambush.

No matter if he had fled from Hwaryong, I had believed that there would at least be a shred of pride in Urdu, pride which any true orc warrior should have.

There existed nothing of it in him: Not the pride of a warrior, nor the pride of a king.

Simply put, he was merely a coward who has survived for many ages.

'Greaa,' and such a coward was now gazing at me in arrogance. Snow covered Urdu's head and shoulders, such a definite sign of him having hidden in the snow. To me, it looked like the funerary cloak of a king, and once the sun shone bright, it would melt away and be no more.

"You are not a king."

I denied the majesty of the being before me by way of mouth, and in my mind, I thought of an empty throne.

“Isn’t it mine, either those high halls, or that dignified throne?

“There is nothing that is not my seat.”

[The Poetry of the Defeated King] rang in my head, and at the same time, I released the spirit and momentum that I had suppressed within myself unto the world.

Overlord Urdu looked at me.

At first glance, he seemed merely curious, as if thinking, ‘Where did this human come from?’

But his curiosity soon became suspicion, and suspicion turned into distrust.

And then, finally, Urdu was surprised.

“I’m curious,” I languidly said as I studied his face, “if you are weaker than in the past, or stronger?”

The presence of the Overlord had felt so strong from a distance, but as I faced him, the momentum contained within his being did not meet my expectations.

“The latter eventuality will be perfect, but it is probably the former.”

And I laughed at Urdu, at the Overlord that had fled from Hwaryong and hidden in a snowy ditch.

Such a being was just an elderly orc who has lived for a very long time.

I raised my sword.

“Even a heroic poem is too good for you.”

The simple, [Extraordinary] poem that the avenger never completed would be more than enough. Blue flames erupted upon Twilight, and I gripped my sword with both hands as I swiveled my waist.

‘Woo~ Woo~’ and before Urdu could react, I attacked.

‘Cheop!’ a blue trajectory arced out in front of me, yet Urdu stepped back and escaped my assault.

“You fear pain?” I ridiculed him in orcish, and Urdu replied by gently leveling his spear at me.

Yet, his gaze was not fixed on me – his rolling red eyes glanced everywhere. Urdu was expecting some kind of trick, so I quickly closed the gap, but he leaped back once more. Then, without a backward glance, the Overlord stomped away, fleeing from me.

I was stricken with surprise – surely, I never thought that he would turn tail and run away. But soon enough, I was almost bent double with laughter, for my Masters had sensed my presence soaring to the ends of the sky, and they were converging upon this spot.

From the rear came Nogisa, who had swept through the orcs, and Arwen and Eli were charging in from the flanks. And just beyond was Adelia, who had shaken off the impact of her collision with Urdu, and she was following him with black murder in her eyes.

My Sword Masters were everywhere, and there was nowhere for Urdu to run to.

‘Swak! Swak!’ a roar erupted in the direction of the fleeing orc, and blazing golden energy bloomed in the area.

I headed towards it, seeing Adelia struggling against the Overlord, raining down blow after blow.

The Overlord swept out with his spear, roaring, and Adelia was beaten back by that fell energy.

But who was Adelia? She was a madwoman who never knew when to stop once she had tasted blood. She rolled across the snow and righted herself, charging straight back at the Overlord. And while she kept Urdu busy, the other Masters arrived.

“If we kill this thing, this damned war is over!” shouted Eli as he rushed at Urdu, his sword glowing like the crescent moon.

“I will join you,” cried Arwen as she attacked the orc, her sword blazing like the stars themselves.

“Recklessness does not suit my temper, but if I break a single foe to save a thousand soldiers, why would I hesitate?” mused Nogisa as he rushed in whilst gathering pure white light on his blade.

‘Oh oh oh oh!’ the Overlord cried as he swept his spear in all directions, and red fervor arose like a great wall, surrounding him. The Aura Blades of the Masters battered against that red wall. However, even if the Overlord had dirtied himself by hiding in a ditch, his fervor remained great, and there came only the rarest of gaps in the wall of energy that blazed around him.

Then, the true breaker of fortresses appeared.

“Here is my chance to get the blood of the greenskin king upon my ax! If Turka hears of this, he will roll on the floor in envy!”

It was Meister Surkara, a dwarf who was a wall in his own right, armored in iron. Surkara gave a bloody laugh as he slashed into Urdu’s fervor barrier with his axe.

‘Bwaak!’ came the roar of the red fervor shaking, and the Overlord was forced a step back after the dwarf, who barely reached the orc’s knees, charged at him.

“The harder they are, the better it tastes if they break!” Surkara bellowed as he readied his axe and once more cleaved into the fervor.

And in that instant, the Masters attacked, all at once.

‘Blsha! Blsha!’ the red wall that had seemed so strong started showing cracks, and it was quickly sundered by successive attacks.

‘Oh oh oh!’ the Overlord cried out as he whipped his spear in every direction, yet all those around him survived his attack and repaid it in kind.

‘Schwak!’ Arwen, whose pauldrons had been bashed from her armor, struck out with her sword.

‘Thuk!’ Eli, whose breastplate was smashed, sliced out from left to right.

‘Bwak!’ the frenetic Adelia leaped high into the air, her sword in a reverse grip, and pierced it into the orc.

“Here’s a taste of a dwarven axe!” exclaimed Surkara as he rolled over the snow and slammed his axe into Urdu’s ankle.

‘Seotuk! Seotuk! Pook! Klap!’ different noises rang out, one after the other. Urdu’s body quickly became bloodied, and he cried out fiercely as he pushed the Masters and the dwarf back. They dared not face the feral, wild strikes of the struggling beast, and they stepped away.

‘Grar!’ the Overlord growled low as he shook his head. He readied his spear, crouched low, his knees almost touching the snow and his arms stretched taught as if we would leap into attack within the next instant.

But Urdu did not charge at the Masters.

‘Dumpf,’ his knees sank into the snow, and he knelt there, looked at me, and shouted, “Valiant human knights!”

His red eyes were ablaze, and his lipless mouth was twisted into a grimace.

“I pay homage to your strength! I, Urdu, commander of the Enraged Flame Legion and Overlord of the twenty-three tribes, admit my defeat!”

And so, Urdu surrendered with vigor.

“I know you are knights of great pride. I believe you know the proper courtesy to show a commander who has admitted defeat!”

It was embarrassing.

CHAPTER 166
THE ROARING LIONS OF THE NORTH (5)

“The monsters are running away!” I heard the knights cry from afar.

I looked around, and the army of monsters that had filled the snowfield was fleeing into the mountains. Their footsteps were like thunder, and they showed no discrimination in trampling and pushing aside their own kind. There was no longer a great legion besieging Winter Castle, for all that remained within the minds of the monsters was base instinct.

However, there was one group of them that held the same lust for battle, from beginning to end. It was the war legion of orcs, gathered under their torn and tattered banners. They struggled against the knights and dwarves, and they fought to the end.

My insides boiled as I watched the scene unfold because the being who had gathered all the monsters into a single army and marched upon Winter Castle has surrendered. Urdu wished only to save his own life.

“Although I am defeated, the valiant warriors of my race are not tied to victory or defeat. They will fight until the last minute, and the damage your forces will suffer will not be small. But, if you accept my surrender as a commander, I promise that they will cease this meaningless shedding of blood.”

Urdu planned to use the lives of those fighting for him as collateral to save his own skin.

The embarrassment that I had at first felt has long since become rage. My hand, which grasped Twilight, trembled.

“If you want, I can make them stop even now,” came the urgent cry of the Overlord as he looked at me.

I stared at him, suppressing my rising, murderous anger.

He was not the Overlord of the greenskin race as I remembered him; he wasn't even a warrior.

He wasn't even an orc; he was merely a remnant of something which had once existed.

'Shlkp,' I returned my sword to its scabbard.

"It is a wisdom that suits your great spirit!" growled Urdu, and the fervor of the orcs, which had filled the field, faded as if it was never there. The sound of clashing weapons, shouts and screams, all ceased to be heard.

"You are able to see how things are going," said the Overlord, and Bernardo Eli frowned at me. There were a lot of things he seemed to want to ask me, yet, with his bloodied face, he was unable to voice such questions.

"If I go back to the mountain, I will stay away. And if I stand under your banner, I will stand strong. For our race, following a mightier being is not a shame, but an honor, so you shall never have to worry about your back," said Urdu and grunted loudly, then added, "Tell me what you want! I'll be happy to follow-"

"Nothing has been decided yet, so shut up." If I kept listening, I'd draw the sword I had just sheathed, so I wanted the beast to be quiet. "I don't want you to die right now." There was a person who would decide on whether Urdu would live or die. "Call the count," I said to Eli, and he tried to ask something but shut his mouth and left us.

"What is it? Why have the orcs suddenly stopped resisting?" It was not long before Eli returned with Vincent.

I stared at him, and I saw a knight whose body was completely drenched by the blood of the greenskin war legion. I saw the reincarnation of a poor man who had failed to gain his vengeance after being robbed of everything – the head of the Balahard family, whose very business was to war against the greenskin race that can not coexist with humanity.

"You decide – will you save him, or will you kill him."

It was to be Count Balahard who would determine the fate of the Overlord.

* * *

Vincent had heard me explain the situation, and he was silent for a while. Then he asked me in a tight-lipped manner, “What benefit would there be if we spared him?”

I tried to suppress my emotions and tried to explain, as objectively as possible, the benefits of accepting the ugly monstrosity’s surrender.

“It will make it possible to prevent further casualties in battle against those remaining in the orc war legion. And it is not impossible to use orcs as soldiers, as long as they are properly shackled. Perhaps you can even escape from the age-old fate that has been the Balahard family’s to bear. Perhaps you can have peace.”

With a stone-hard face, Vincent asked me what the opposite action that of killing Urdu would entail.

“To fight and win, and remember those who die upon this day. And you will continue to fight against the harsh winter and the horrors it brings, year after year.”

Just as winter has existed, so it will continue to exist for a very long time.

Vincent had no answer, and I saw he could not easily reach a decision. He just chewed on his lips.

It was natural, for if there was no choice but to fight, almost everyone would fight.

However, once you realized that there was a way to avoid fighting, it became difficult to choose the violent option first. And on the other side of the coin, it was not easy to lay down arms and stop fighting with someone while still having resentment towards them in your heart.

Nothing was easy, and no choice could be lightly made.

By a single word, hundreds, thousands could live on this day, or they could die.

As the weight of the choice was so great, it deserved heavy contemplation.

I waited quietly for Vincent to speak, and the gathered knights were doing so as well their expressions complex. Everyone knew that his words could reignite a terrible war and that a single word from Vincent might lead to them becoming corpses in the snow.

“Hmm,” Meister Surkara grumbled, his mouth watering as he looked at the orc. I noticed that the dwarf had a lot to say, yet he did not open his mouth and, by doing so, deepen or lighten Vincent’s anguish.

Everyone waited.

“You have subdued the enemy king with the strength of your hearts, so where will you find a more valuable triumph? You are the victors, and you are worthy of enjoying the glory due to you as vanquishers!” Only the elderly orc spoke.

Time passed, and the sun had gone down then completely disappeared. My body, drenched in sweat and blood, cooled, and chills began to race down my spine.

Knights furled their cloaks and put up their fur collars, and no one complained of the cold. Snow began to fall, and it started to cover the horrors of battle.

“I…” Vincent opened his mouth. “I…” he hesitated, again and again. “You…”

I could see how agonizing it was for him.

“Count.”

Before Vincent could say anything, the one-eyed cavalry commander spoke up.

“Know that I, Quéon Lichtheim, have never feared death for even a moment, and I have never considered death as ephemeral.”

Quéon unclasped his black eyepatch and threw it to the ground.

“Even if I lose the one eye that remains to me, I will not cower and beg just so that I can live an impassioned life.”

That was the beginning.

“Even if the lance is shattered and the body torn, the unbending soul must remain the same.”

“We are not a burden for our lord to carry, but the swords and spears that he will wield!” the Black Lancers beat upon their chests with their spears, all at once.

“I don’t want the son of brave Bale Balahard to have to break his heart because of us!”

“If I have to fight for a hundred years, I will fight! And if I must fight for a thousand, I shall fight even if I die and become naught but a drifting soul!”

The knights stamped their feet.

“Don’t hesitate in front of victory!”

“What we want is victory at the end of struggle, not the peace achieved by compromising with a coward!”

The rangers on the walls shouted, adding their voices. There was no one who wished to compromise their values for the sake of peace.

“I don’t think that iron which bends easily can be mended with ease. The word of a beast who surrendered his own people for the sake of his own life is unreliable.”

“I think it would be better to ensure that the events of today are not repeated by removing the agent who have caused them.”

“I am Count Ghern, and I think as the others do.”

The lords of the Allied Northern Forces had been thrown into chaos when the orcs erupted into their ranks, and those of them who had survived now gave voice to their opinions as if they had been awaiting the moment to do so.

“We men of the north are different from the southerners with their hot and lazy summer months!” an impassioned northern lord cried out, and Nogisa coughed.

“I cannot agree with those words, for even if the summer is sunny, the rains showers and typhoons are not warm or pleasurable,” Nogisa said. The northern lord wanted to say something, but the old knight added, “But I agree with the general consensus: I have not forgotten the fact that the Knights of the Palace and the Royal Infantry have come here to fight.”

Vincent’s expression was distorted, conflicted, and he seemed to be smiling and frowning at once.

“If I close my eyes and save him, we can end this heinous war,” said Vincent, and the knights and soldiers answered with protests as they heard this. “I will open my eyes and fight the enemy instead of becoming blind for the sake of peace,” said Vincent, and his face was now easy to read.

“I don’t know how many are going to die for us to end this battle today.”

“If someone has to die, it will be me.”

The men’s answers remained unchanged.

Vincent looked at me, and I shrugged – it was all up to the will of the count. He then nodded as he saw my silent assent, and hesitation was no longer to be seen upon his face.

“Now, wait a minute!” came the urgent exclamation of the Overlord as he read the change in atmosphere.

“I will not accept the surrender of an unscrupulous beast sans honor!” Vincent declared.

“Death to the orcs!”

“To these invaders: Only death!”

The knights shouted, and the rangers and Allied Northern Forces clashed their weapons and shouted war cries.

That was when someone started singing Winter Castle’s song of war.

“Silent are the snowy peaks and the blood-drenched walls”

“Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

One song quickly became the song of thousands.

“At the blizzard’s end, I wander, seeking warmth”

“And only warmed can I be by a dark green fire”

“In front of it, I stand and wait for burning spring to come”

“And the village through harshest winter waits for spring to come”

And at that moment, a message broke into my head.

[-] We sing of the spring that will come after the harshest season, after storm and blizzard [-]

[-] New [Poetry of War] has been created [-]

[-] During the war, [Poetry of War – Four Seasons: Poem of Spring] was created]

As soon as I grasped this message, I knew – I knew what [Poetry of War] was.

It was different from Muhunshi, for it was not a simple song that resonated with mana hearts and rings.

It was one song, yet many, a song expressed as aspirations that flowed from multiple mouths.

And it wasn’t me who created the words, but the men of winter; I just wove them together, and a song started echoing in my mind.

‘The birds who’ve flown back along the road the wind passed by return’

‘The fortress once exposed to cold and snow now wakes and stretches’

My mouth moved of its own accord.

“The birds who’ve flown back along the road the wind passed by return”

“The fortress once exposed to cold and snow now wakes and stretches”

Thousands of aspiring wills borrowed my mouth and sang of spring.

In the middle of the song, my heart started beating like mad, and a transfer took place.

A strange wave erupted to all sides, and no song was alike, and no song was new.

It was the sound of new [Poems of Night]. This was the moment that the seeds I had sown in the north, those once-broken knights who now gathered mana in the heart, have finally started their story.

'Pwoo~' a faint light began to flow from Vincent's body, a weak but unmistakable sign of awakening.

Not knowing what was happening to his body, Count Balahard raised his sword and pointed it at the enemy.

"All troops! Ready for battle!"

"Ha!" thousands of troops answered his command as one.

"Attack!"

The knights roared as they rushed toward the war legion, and the Allied Northern Forces followed the charge. The palace and the royal infantry broke rank and struck at the flanks of the orcish war legion.

"You are foolish!" roared the old orc, still on his knees, as he snapped awake.

He opened his mouth, and I drew my sword.

Before that ugly roar erupted from his maw; before he could once more sully this war with his false dignity, the flames of my true spirit fell upon his body.

Blue flames raged as they clung to a bloody body half-melted by the breath of the fire dragon.

'Aaahhhhh!' it screamed and wildly waved its hands. The earth burst apart as fervor flowed from Urdu, and a man rushed toward the old orc who was thrashing in fear. A green flash erupted from the man's sword as it cleaved through the Overlord's fervor.

There he was: The reincarnation of an ill-fated avenger who had been unable to claim his vengeance against the Overlord who had robbed him of everything.

And now, the man has finally reached completion and become the ninth champion of the kingdom.

“For Balahard!” Vincent Balahard exclaimed with ferocity.

“For Balahard!” knights and soldiers roared as one.

CHAPTER 167
WHAT KIND OF COUNTRY IS THIS COUNTRY? (1)

The entire battlefield was filled with shouts as knights and the soldiers of the Allied Northern Forces called out Balahard's name. The palace knights and arquebusiers who lived only for the glory and well-being of the royal family were shouting the name of Winter Castle instead of the name of the Leonbergers, if only for the moment.

It was their own homage to their choice of rejecting spring and plunging into the bleak winter, and their mourning for the infinite possibilities that they had given up – for these warriors could have escaped this frozen land and headed to the warm realm of the south.

And they freely chose winter, with the lords and soldiers of the Allied Northern Forces having made the same choice. And as everyone cried out the name of Balahard, the fierce resistance put up by the orcish war legion was slowly drawing to an end.

All that was left now were the orcs, whose numbers were not enough to constitute a single legion. The forces of Winter Castle surrounded them and attacked them with ferocity.

I was there, aiding them.

"For Balahard!" and I cried out the same name as them.

And it wasn't long before we could sever the neck of the orcish force, which had resisted until the end.

There were no shouts of victory, for the knights and I turned around after defeating the orcs and headed for an area upon the snowfield as if it was our promised duty.

We headed to the place where the battle between Overlord Urdu and the Masters

was in full swing.

‘Klang! Klang!’ there was a great clashing of weapons, and the frozen earth was furrowed by Urdu’s spear blazing with red fervor, a weapon which possessed great power.

Yet, that was all: Urdu’s spear did not even touch the tips of the Masters’ hairs. His resistance was without meaning: He only dug through the earth and sliced into the air.

I kept my sword sheathed as I watched the battle.

There it was: The miserable figure of an old orc, a being born with a royal spirit who had once been called the King of the Orcs while he led Warlords into battle.

And this beast now screamed in pain, wreathed in flames that he could not distinguish, flames ignited by my qi through a mere [Extraordinary] attack.

There was evidence that the spirit of the Overlord had been damaged beyond his control. Now he was simply a monster with a strong body and fervor, and the strength left in him was nothing in front of the joint efforts of the Masters. Their Aura Blades were cleaving into his flesh, but Urdu roared and resisted all the more fiercely. Yet, the more he resisted, the greater was the intensity with which the flames of my true spirit burned upon his body.

Then, at some point, the inferno completely swallowed him.

‘Aah aah ah ah!’ with a terrible scream, he swung his spear at random, and Arwen shattered that fierce weapon of his. One of his flaming forearms was severed, and Eli cut off a leg as the old orc screamed on.

The remaining leg was parted from Urdu’s body by Adelia.

Nogisa’s blade sliced across Urdu’s eyes.

‘Eh eh eh eh!’ the beast cried out in pain and terror as he sank to the snow, supporting himself with the only arm left to him. Meister Surkara had been about to attack, yet he stopped his axe mid-swing.

“This is not my job.”

Then the dwarf spat on the orc, said that he had sated his appetite, and turned around.

As if the Masters had undertaken a silent oath, they stepped back.

'Ksrchk~ Ksrch~' Vincent, gasping for breath, approached the fallen orc.

"Sa- Save me! Spare me…" before Urdu could continue his pathetic begging, Vincent drew back his blade, and the sword of the Balahard family, the symbol of the count, pierced into the back of Urdu's neck.

The beast's mouth gaped open as breath escaped from it, and Vincent twisted his sword sharply.

The orc's head was severed, and its body sagged into a great puddle of blood.

The hideous, half-scorched face of the coward lay upon the snow, the face of a craven beast who had pursued a life of selfish ambition until the last minute.

Vincent staggered forward and picked up the bloodied head.

"Behold!"

Vincent closed his eyes for a while, then opened them. He raised the Overlord's head high and shouted, "Victory is ours!"

Knights and soldiers heard the count's roar and burst into shouts.

"You killed the king of the orcs!"

"We won!"

They banged their bloody swords and spears upon their chests and gave frantic shouts proclaiming victory.

"We drove off the monsters!"

The Allied Northern Forces and royal reinforcements shouted like madmen.

[-] [Poetry of Divor… [-]

[-] Connected to [Poetry of Domination]… [-]

So great and deep was their roar that it even deafened the message that resonated within my mind.

I blocked the message, for I did not wish to hear such a soft thing – right now, I wanted to hear the shouts proclaiming the hallowed victory that all gathered had won without compromise.

I captured the image of those crying out in triumph and blinking away tears – I captured that image in my memory. I wouldn't miss a single moment.

In the future, some might mock today's triumph as a worthless victory claimed by fools. Among those who were here today, there might even be some who would regret what was done.

They would ask: Is it not possible to put aside pride and hate for the sake of a greater cause?

They would say: Forgiveness is worth more than any form of vengeance.

And if anyone truly spoke such words, I would answer them in this manner: For whose cause did these warriors fight, and who deserves to even dare belittle the choice they had made?

While everyone was enjoying the warm sun of lands without war, only these warriors faced the harsh winter.

Forgiveness and revenge were certainly the choices offered upon this day. Sayings that absolution has more value than vengeance are words merely spoken from the mouths of those who have not experienced the perils and insults that these warriors had faced.

Today's victory would never be a futile one. The decision made today was not foolish. And these warriors did not ponder overmuch; they just chose.

Instead of choosing a momentary peace by compromising with a coward, they chose to honor their own history and their own cause. In the name of a cause that anyone would understand, those gathered here, in their simplicity, chose not to ignore the cry of their hearts.

Even if their choice would cause them to stand facing the blizzard and its wind once more – could anyone dismiss their resolve as the crudity of fools?

If there was such a person, I would visit them myself and crush their snout with my knuckles.

I had already seen too many who shied away from great sacrifice for the sake of immediate peace.

Nobles who had lost their pride, knights who believed that they were defeated. A monarch who had lost his spirit.

And these are those whose hearts had been broken in the name of a peaceful cause; they are the ones who unconsciously step back whenever the name of the empire is uttered.

There are so many of these craven souls in this kingdom.

It is of great benefit to me that there are those who had kept their strength to the very end in Leonberg, for the path I have to walk is a thorny path that cannot be journeyed upon by making compromises.

“We won!” came Vincent’s fierce roar as he raised the Overlord’s head high.

I studied Vincent, and the momentum and energy of a Master that had shone so brightly from him a while ago could no longer be felt. That great presence had disappeared as if it had been an illusion.

I knew that this was natural, for Vincent’s awakening was not complete.

Perhaps it had been a temporary change in him as a response to the creation of that great war poem, or maybe it was a momentary brilliance, a brief appearance of the avenger’s flames that blazed in Vincent’s true soul.

I couldn’t be sure of anything right now.

Yet I believed that, even if it was only a moment of brilliance, Vincent’s body and soul will remember this day and will grow constantly. And sooner or later, the day will come when Vincent will blaze with the same brightness as he did today.

It would be the reward for the torment and suffering he had endured in his previous life; it was the glory promised to an uncompromising man. And it wasn't just completion and restoration that was promised to Vincent.

"If he had made a compromise with that greenskin monster, no dwarf would ever have come to this fortress again," said Meister Surkara as he came to me. "Because we never keep bonds of friendship with hypocrites who weaken their will for brief gains."

The dwarf's tone was blunt, but it contained a tone of satisfaction that he could not hide.

"These warriors, their minds are like flames, and their souls are like iron. We dwarves like to have friends like that."

"Friend," I muttered. It was no common thing to hear a dwarf calling someone their friend.

Dwarves are stubborn craftsmen, and they know no compromise, for they live lives of pure aspiration.

For them, to compromise is a grave sin.

Dwarves do not recognize their allies as friends simply because they fought together, and the dwarves do not consider them friends merely because they show goodwill through numerous gifts and favors.

The dwarves are very demanding; they are a race who have their standards and keep to them.

Those called friends by the dwarves are lucky indeed, and if they are in great peril, the dwarves will actively support them as if they were aiding their own people.

"I'm going to tell tales of this day as soon as I return home," said Surkara.

"I thought Meisters never made friends," said I.

"Aye, being a friend is hard. To help a friend, you sometimes have to sweep out the barn and haul some heavy ass. But that's my burden, friend prince, not yours."

I could not stop myself from laughing.

The blessing of iron and flame given to these honest men of the north by the dwarf was not something I had expected.

* * *

Rangers rescued the wounded and recovered the remains of the dead by scouring the snow that had fallen and settled during the night. The casualties among the rangers were lower than expected, thanks to the knights fighting upon the walls from the very beginning. However, the damage suffered by the soldiers of the Allied Northern Forces could not be ignored.

The allied forces had been kept in reserve and only entered direct battle once the war neared its end, once everyone charged out in the counter-offensive. Nevertheless, they were completely caught off guard by the orcs that had risen from the snow and so had suffered enormous casualties.

In the short period of time between their charge and the coming of the palace knights and royal infantry to stem the chaos, the allied northerners lost thirty percent of their entire force.

The damage was too great for them to merely cheer the hard-won victory. In the end, they knew that there was a need for reorganization and replenishment of their ranks, so they decided to leave Winter Castle and return to their territories.

“Please call us at any time. We will leave everything and rush to your aid.”

“Winter Castle is not alone. Never forget that we stand behind you.”

Their faces were sincere upon the day of their departure. The spirit reigning among them seemed not to be one of regretting the enormous losses that they had suffered.

Even if they only spent one winter together with the forces of Balahard, it seemed as if they had completely regained the true fighting spirit of the north, which they had lost during their years of indolence.

Vincent expressed his deepest appreciation for their goodwill and friendship and decided that he would ride with them for a day upon the road that left from the South Gate.

I could see that Vincent saw it as well: A lot was lost in this war, but we had also gained a great deal. Indeed, it was so.

And now neighbors who rarely showed their faces clung to the walls and gates damaged by the fierce battles – they were the dwarves. One hundred of the two hundred who had battled here remained behind to aid in repairing the damaged defenses.

“Where the hell was our artillery support? If you’re going to do a job, then you should be properly trained in it! You buggers could’ve chucked the cannons over the walls and done more damage than you did!”

Some of the dwarves were frustrated by the clumsy technique of the rangers who operated the cannons, so they taught them how to use the great iron guns.

“What you have here is technology that is at least three hundred years old. Oh, it would have been quite useful during those times, but not now! It hurts the pride of our entire race that you so proudly use such obsolete guns in war.”

Another dwarf wished to improve the hook guns used by the arquebusiers of the royal infantry.

“I bet you won’t be able to use these for even a few shots more. Some of them have already burst at the muzzle! If you use them a few more times, the others will also break.”

Nogisa looked troubled. It was a welcome sight to see dwarven hands upon weapons long ago forged by dwarves, but the mere existence of the hand cannons was a royal secret, so I knew that Nogisa saw many difficulties in entrusting the guns to the dwarves for improvement.

“This is a rare opportunity, so just close your eyes and let it pass.”

I went ahead and persuaded Nogisa. He knew well which outcome would be more beneficial to the royal family, so he accepted my persuasive words, even if he pretended that my logic had not won out.

Vincent returned after seeing the northern lords off and was quite embarrassed to see the sudden changes that the industrious dwarves had brought about. But he was soon amazed by their labors, so he just stuck to his normal duties.

And during that process of recovering from the damager of the recent war and preparing for the future, news reached me from the capital.

((Your Highness! Something happened!))

Montpellier's voice sounded very nervous as it came from the crystal ball.

"Ah, you again. What is it?" I asked with some anxiety, though I was by now used to Montpellier's spells of nervousness. I figured that, as before, it wouldn't be that big a deal.

It was.

CHAPTER 168
WHAT KIND OF COUNTRY IS THIS COUNTRY? (2)

((The fire dragon that appeared all of a sudden has turned the south into smoking ruins!))

My heart rattled as I heard Montpellier say this.

“Where is he now?” I asked, trying to calm my thudding heart.

((It is said that it has made its nest in the holdings that were those of the Duke of Terjuana))

It was the first time I’ve ever heard of a Terjuana family, and as far as I knew, there were no nobles of that name in the kingdom. So, I asked where it was.

((One month south of Hwangdo)))

“Hwangdo?”

((Of course, for it is the empire that the dragon has attacked… Did you think this was the kingdom’s peril?))

“What?”

((The fire dragon attacked the empire, not the Leonberg Kingdom))

“This damn thing!”

My surprise became anger, and my anger was expressed as a cuss.

“Why did you say it like it happened in our land?”

((The empire is my homeland, so I said it so without knowing…)))

Montpellier made his excuse and quickly continued talking, and I took control of my amazement and listened to his explanation.

((The fire dragon has now made nest in the southern territories of the empire…)

Dozens of castles in the empire's south have been burned, and cities turned into naught but ashes. And within that inferno had been the legions waiting in the southern forts to board the fleet sailing to Dotrin.

It was truly a big deal, yet it was the empire's big deal, for they had lost dozens of noble families in a single day and had suffered massive damage.

((It is said that the damage is considerable even in those provinces far removed from the fire dragon's rampage. And among them is the province of my family))

It was also a big deal to Montpellier, for he had suffered considerable damage to his estates.

((It seems that the emperor has no intention of ending the war with Dotrin in the midst of this calamity. Troops from the northeast and southeast of the empire are marching on in unison))

"If it's the northeast… then that's the territories bordering our kingdom."

And it turned out to be a big deal for the southern legion of Leonberg, for they are bound to be sensitive to the slightest changes taking place across the border.

However, just because it was a great matter for so many did not mean it affected everyone in the same way.

For the empire, it is the greatest crisis since its founding. It also an urgent situation in which Montpellier's family has been left bereft of their estate.

And to our kingdom…

"This is an opportunity."

It was a great opportunity for Leonberg to escape from the empire's political pressure and domination.

* * *

Montpellier's whining voice was no longer heard from the crystal ball. While many thoughts ran through my mind, I immediately left my seat and summoned the commanders of Winter Castle.

"How dangerous is the existence of this being named Hwaryong?"

They wanted to know if the fact that Hwaryong had settled himself in the empire was a mere rain shower or a great storm that could shake the very roots of a giant tree.

"Unless Hwaryong withdraws on its own, the empire will not be able to rebuild the cities that have been ruined."

Wherever Hwaryong lived was his territory, and the fire dragon wasn't one who showed mercy to those who invaded his territory.

There would be no protests against his actions and no negotiations.

Even if the legitimate, original owner of the land filed a protest, the only response would be flaming horror and fiery death.

"If this had been another time, this would have been resolved over time. But now the empire has no time to do so."

They were in the midst of their attempted conquest of Dotrin, a war they wanted to win so that they could reinforce the propaganda of the empire's heavenly dignity.

The first conquest had failed, and the second conquest had been virtually defeated on land. The imperial fleet, who had conducted two landings on Dotrin's shores so far, had not made large gains due to fierce resistance from Dotrin.

And now, the imperial mainland had been violated by Hwaryong.

If time passed and the empire abandoned their plans for Dotrin to focus on Hwaryong, then the dignity and power the empire was trying to project would exist no more.

Somehow, the empire had to make a show of force, lest their neighboring countries, which they have been repressing, issue declarations of secession or war, one after

the other.

However, the empire did not seem sp powerful now, not even on the Dotrin front, for the descendants of Umbert Dormund had long since been preparing for a protracted war against the empire.

And now, a terrible monster has turned countless imperial strongholds into ash. The word ‘dilemma’ was apt in describing current conditions within the empire.

Into my mind came the image of the emperor, he who had so arrogantly looked down upon me from his throne. And when I thought that the emperor, who always pretended to be so proud, was now having a migraine, I could not keep myself from laughing.

“And that’s not all,” I chuckled when I thought about what would happen to the empire in the future.

Even if the projected dignity of the empire would be tarnished and its neighboring nations no longer paid heed to threats that are not backed up by power, there would still be a more visible, visceral peril awaiting the empire: All the horrors, many types of beings, that would arise and be led by the energy of the fire dragon.

Just as countless monsters and divergent species had come to live in the north where Gwangryong had once established itself, so too all manner of things would soon flock into imperial territory.

The only difference was that Gwangryong had tried to control his followers so that he could create his own kingdom. Hwaryong wouldn’t care about his minions at all: Whether they bowed down in worship or charged out in hordes to attack humans, the fire dragon would remain indifferent.

The commanders of Winter Castle had all bowed their heads as they listened to the changes that the appearance of Hwaryong would bring about. They now raised their heads as one, and as I met their gazes, I saw what theories were racing through their minds.

“Ah, you guys thought so as well,” I said, and added, “Hwaryong’s territory and all the adjacent provinces will become as winter.”

They would not be facing cold winds that can freeze a man down to his very soul, but

an infernal thing that burns all before it, as if a great fire would be raging across the land.

And all that would be left, after those living became dead, would be small heaps of ash, for even their very souls would be scorched from them.

Countless deaths and great chaos would descend upon the empire – and that's what I've been wishing for all this time.

"I will head to the capital."

The commanders had become relaxed since the end of the war. As they heard these words, it seemed as if their energy flared up, as if swords had been unsheathed within their hearts.

* * *

There was a lot to do before I headed to the capital. My main priority was to fill the void in management that was created by my prolonged absence while I was in Dotrin.

Ranger Jordan guided me in place of Vincent, who was busy with the duties of a count.

"That is the white night tower."

I turned, and following Jordan's pointing finger, I saw a spire towering high in the distance. It was a structure of great beauty, for it had been built under the touch of the dwarves.

Due to the treaty with the empire, the tower could only be built up to the third floor, so its shape seemed like that of a tower that has only been constructed to half its length.

But the Dwarves were beings of sublime craft, so the appearance of the tower was in no way ugly.

Thanks to such factors, the tower looked like an ancient building of proud heritage, and I admired it greatly.

But what I wanted to see wasn't just a beautiful building.

I went inside straight away, accepting the greetings of the guards and the rangers who watched over the tower.

The interior was as majestic as the interior, a work of art, yet not a space cluttered with too many statues and decorations.

"You are here," said the High Lich from where she stood in the middle of the room. Ophelia, the white night mage, still covered her ghastly, skeletal appearance with the illusion of flesh.

"Jordan, you wait here," ordered I.

"Okay," came his answer after a while.

I left Jordan behind and followed Ophelia up into the tower.

The first floor, where Ophelia had greeted me, had been an empty space. It was from the second floor on that the building showed evidence of it being a true tower.

All kinds of bizarre laboratories and equipment were scattered about, as well as books written by Ophelia's hand. And there were twenty or so wizards wrestling with tomes and equipment both.

I had seen the wizards from a distance in the last battle, and they had been reciting arcane words, their eyes clear, or making gestures of unknown meaning.

It was all very bizarre to me. Many of them had sulky expressions and pale skin. I saw one sobbing and another groping in his mouth with his hand. Many of them looked like the dead.

"Their talent is less than that of the wizards of old, but their enthusiasm is far greater."

It was as Ophelia said, for I saw that the wizards lacked proper sleep, so hard did they work. Some of them were dozing off, their heads snapping up as they woke and screamed at something, and then going to sleep once more. The faces of those who did not sleep were fatigued.

One of those tired wizards was a man that I knew.

“Taylor?”

It was indeed Taylor, second son of Baron Tailheim, and the first opponent I had faced in my duels years ago.

“Ah, your Highness remembers the name of a lowly guy like me,” said Taylor as he accepted my greeting with a thrilled face.

“Why are you here?”

“I somehow learned that I was talented at magic,” Taylor answered as he scratched his shoulders.

But my question had not been about talent.

“You were a knight.”

He might have been low-level, but Taylor had still been an apprentice knight who had accepted a mana ring into his body. I knew that knights who gathered mana into their bodies could not learn the magical arts, except for a special few.

In the past, this had been the reigning orthodoxy.

But now was not the past, for knights gathered mana in rings and not hearts, and these rings of theirs were very similar to the circle of a wizard.

As I realized this, I looked at Ophelia.

“It’s hard to do anything if they have three or more, but if they have one or two, they can change their traits enough to try their hand at arcane craft.”

Ophelia added that in only two years, the trainees of the tower had managed to exert magical power that could be employed in battle.

A hypothesis entered my mind, but before I could voice it, it was refuted by Ophelia.

“You cannot use a sword and magic at the same time. Also, the limit for a wizard who has already started to walk upon the path of the ring is four circles.”

I had already been thinking of a unit of magical swordsmen who wielded both blade and circles, but my hopes had been dashed. If this was possible, the world would already have been overflowing with wizard knights.

Swallowing my disappointment, I started ascending the stairs, then Taylor's voice caught my attention.

"See you next time," said he, and as I turned around, Taylor and the other wizards were looking at me with determined faces.

"I will stand behind your Highness like a proud wizard."

Each of the wizards spoke up, then.

"There will be no magic greater than ours."

"Next time, I will create a true magical flame."

I could see their resolve upon their flushed faces and in their exhausted eyes, a testament to all their faithful and hard work. I could give no answer, faced with such determination, for I had not expected it.

When these people had first visited Winter Castle, I had seen them as lowly specimens with faded souls, and I had forgotten about them. They were nothing but hostages to me, tasty baits tied to a line so that I could assure the future of Winter Castle.

And now, such people were saying with clear eyes that they would aid in bringing about a better future for Leonberg. I felt strange, and then something hot soared through my heart.

Okay… what kind of country is this country?

There were countless Masters and mages in this kingdom; there were knights like lions and wizards like dragons.

A country protected by lions who feared not death: This was such a country.

In a small kingdom that stood upon a barren land, more heroes and Muhunshis were being born than anywhere else.

We now faced the empire which had tried to break the ambitions of Leonberg once and for all. We had to fight back against this empire. And Leonberg was a country that could do it; that is why the empire had worked so hard for many years to destroy the nobles and royalty of this kingdom.

Eventually, the royal family had lost their strength, and the nobles had fallen into corruption or cowardice.

However, in the midst of such ruin, the embers of hope had still remained, burning upon this barren earth.

It may have been frozen in the cold winds and blizzards, and the reality the kingdom bared to the outside might have looked terrible and weak.

Yet, the embers had constantly smoldered, and now they had begun to blaze once more.

The north was the beginning, for I was tending the flames that have just started to burn.

I jutted out my chin and ascended the tower in silence, and Ophelia was silent as well; she merely acted as my guide through the tower.

After touring the tower, we finally reached the underground dungeon that had been created so as to be hidden from the eyes of the empire – an underground crypt that was still bare and desolate.

“In half a year at the latest, half of the trainees will be here, and they will learn the magic of the old kingdom.”

Ophelia’s tone seemed to implore me to wait half a year, but I did not have that much time.

When I returned after my inspection of the tower, fresh news was awaiting me.

“The imperial army that has invaded the southern part of Dotrin has been defeated!”

It was reported that only a handful of survivors managed to reach their fleet and flee.

This was the moment when I learned that the second attempted conquest of Dotrin

has turned into a complete failure.

“It is being said that the King of Dotrin and the Knights of the Sky have set out to attack the empire’s mainland!”

It was also the moment when the Sky Knights had sensed an opportunity and so launched their counter-assault.

I gathered the commanders of Winter Castle and declared, “I am heading to the capital.”

Those who already knew I was going to the capital wore fresh faces. However, their carefree expressions did not exist for long.

“All of the knights except the Black Lancers go south with me.”

These commanders weren’t stupid enough not to know what I meant.

CHAPTER 169
FILLING THE WINEGLASS WITH BLOOD (1)

No one dared to speak first, so important was the matter at hand. Still, rather than being pressured by the prospect of it, they all seemed keen on the subject.

“Take the Black Lancers too,” said Vincent after a long silence.

He went so far as to say that he could even send half the rangers with me along with the lancers. I refused, saying that Winter Castle’s defenses would be too weakened.

However, Vincent did not bend before my will.

“After studying the movements of the monsters in the mountains, the evaluation is that there will be no large-scale invasion by them this winter.”

“According to the rangers, most of the monsters that survived the siege have headed for the Frost Mountains, far beyond the Blade’s Edge Mountains.”

The commanders who had kept quiet now spoke up as they gave strength to the views of their count.

Everyone said, in essence: “Do not worry about Winter Castle.”

“The winter is over,” said Vincent firmly.

He went on to explain why winter, the hardest of times, was over, but his words didn’t sound like much to me. Blah blah blah.

Then, like a hallucination, a noise of something breaking forced itself into my ears. It was as if all the walls had been covered by a thick layer of ice which was now starting to crack; it also sounded like the breaking of a thick chain, so great a chain that it had connected my previous life to the present.

My heart thudded in my chest, and my temple was heating up like crazy.

The air in front of me seemed hazy, as if it was warm vapor.

“Your Highness?” Vincent called to me anxiously.

His face looked the same as it had been in the recent battle, and he expressed his concern, asking if my body had suffered some damage. I didn’t even know what it was that had happened. As I regained my senses, I heard the ringing sound of dwarves hammering coming through the conference room window, as well the lively swearing and shouting of the rangers.

‘The birds who’ve flown back along the road the wind passed by return’

‘The fortress once exposed to cold and snow now wakes and stretches’

I heard [Poetry of War – Poem of Spring] echoing in my head, and somehow, it fit my mood nicely.

In the end, it seemed that not accepting the craven offer of the old orc did not matter, for when the war was won, and after countless monsters fled in terror, winter was already over.

Even while it snowed upon the mountains and blizzards raged across the land, and while the frigid weather around the castle was the same as ever, spring had secretly snuck up to our noses like a thief in the night.

I only realized this now, for this great peace has not existed from the beginning. All I needed was time for the snow to melt and the seeds to sprouts from the earth.

This enlightenment brought me such happiness that I could not help but laugh out loud.

“Your majesty, did you suffer a concussion in the last battle?”

The upright man, Vincent, who had abandoned peace the moment he had made his choice and rather chose bondage to a cause, chose to struggle, still spoke with worry, for he did not know that spring was imminent.

But they will know it soon, once the snow upon the walls melts and once their damp furs and armor dry out.

They would know that spring had come; they would finally realize it.

* * *

The meeting was over, and night had come.

As I walked across the wall, I saw a familiar face in the distance. It was Vincent, and he was clutching a bottle of wine.

“Vincent.”

“I can’t sleep,” he said as he saw me and then raised the bottle.

I did not hesitate as I took it from him and smacked it to my lips.

“Drink a little, only a little! It’ll be annoying if I have to go down and get another one.”

It was unreasonable for him to be so stingy with such cheap wine, especially as he was a count. So, I downed the entire bottle and relaxed my arm. My insides felt hot as the wine flowed into my stomach.

Vincent frowned as I handed him the empty bottle, and I gave a bored burp.

After Vincent threw the emptied bottle over the wall, he put his hand into the deep, inside pockets of his fur cloak.

‘Shh~’ when he showed his hand once more, he held a new bottle. I arched my eyebrows, for Vincent had acted as if there was only a single bottle, yet here he was with another.

This did not improve my mood, for it felt as if his lie was a slap in my face, yet even if I was grumpy, I could not think of an excuse by which I would condemn his behavior.

Vincent popped the cork of the other bottle, and as he started drinking from it, it seemed as if he had been looking forward to this drink.

‘Ugugug~’ as he drank, I noticed how flushed his face was. It seemed that Vincent had drunk quite a bit before I had come upon the wall. I reached out my hand, but Vincent hid the bottle behind his back.

“There is really no more after this one.”

“Stop being such a childish lord.”

“If you really want to drink, go and get your own.”

“You’re annoying,” said I.

“You’re annoying me too,” said he.

The rangers who were doing their jobs by staring over the wall shook their heads as if finding our behavior absurd. I ignored them and turned away from Vincent, and as I stared out at the mountain range rising over the snowfield, I heard the sound of Vincent chugging wine. For a while, I only listened to the sound of him drinking, and I said not a word.

‘Pchoop!’

I heard the sound of a cork being popped, and when I turned my head, I saw that Vincent had a fresh bottle at his mouth.

“It’s the last one,” promised Vincent.

“Oh, that is the last one?” I asked, for, contrary to his words, I could hear a clanging of glass coming from his coat. It seemed as if he had brought up all the liquor that had been in the castle’s kitchen.

I looked at him in silence, and I saw that Vincent’s face was anguished.

I didn’t know if it was because of some regrets he held about the choice he had made or because he was concerned for the future.

Vincent did not speak and give voice to his feelings, and I had no intention of speaking up and offering some sort of consolation or encouragement.

I sat by his side for a very long time. I sat there until Vincent completely emptied the last bottle.

‘Chuf～’ he stumbled up from his seat.

“I’m going down now,” said he.

“Uh, I’ll come down later,” came my answer.

Vincent looked at me and then turned around.

‘Strk~’ his waist had been slumped against the wall when he had sat, but as he walked, he straightened his back. And once he had walked a few steps, I saw he walked straight without shaking or stumbling.

I saw no signs of drunkenness, and his posture did not speak of a man in agony: All I saw was a man’s rock-hard back, straight and true.

“Oh, it’s cold,” said Ranger Jordan as he sneaked up and handed me a bottle and a cup once Vincent was finally out of sight.

“Keep this one a secret from the count,” said Jordan.

“Uh, thank you.”

Jordan told me that he did not want to drink the bottle with the other Ranger Company Commanders because it was a special drink for a serious occasion. We sprinkled our last cup-fulls over the wall and onto the snow in memory of those who have passed away in the recent battle.

I started heading down the wall.

“Your Highness,” said Quéon as he looked at me and frowned, and it seemed that he had smelled the alcohol on my body as we passed one another.

“The wind blows hard, so please get inside quickly,” Quéon implored, coughed, and continued climbing the stairs leading to the castle wall.

As I walked past Quéon, I remembered that the drunkards I had left behind on the wall were still there.

“Ah, poor Jordan,” I expressed my casual condolence, wishing them luck with their future encounter with the stern, one-eyed cavalry commander.

* * *

The next day, I woke up a bit late and immediately summoned my knights.

I checked their achievements, one by one. What they had gained in the recent battle, and what effect their efforts had on the war. There were no great changes for Arwen, for her rings had only recently hardened.

I quietly studied the momentum of Arwen's energy. Among the Sword Masters using rings I know of, the strongest one had been my uncle. The Silver Lion, as well as the palace knight commander from the central region, were inferior in many ways to Bale Balahard. And Arwen also fell short of his level, yet her solid nature, the stability of her rings, and her countless practical experiences made her a harder knight than any I knew.

I was very pleased with the sturdiness hidden under her delicate appearance.

"Your energy fits your nickname of 'Knight of Steel.'"

"I just try my best," said Arwen with a blushing face as she stared at the knights beside her.

I followed her gaze, which settled on Adelia and Eli. Their changes, unlike Arwen's, were very dramatic and noticeable. The greatest change within them was their karma.

After they had fought against the greenskin Overlord, they had finally gone beyond [Extraordinary] and reached the level of heroes.

Although the Overlord's spirit had been damaged long ago and the karma they had gotten from the battle wasn't perfect, it was clear that they had at least gained a limited amount of it.

Thus, Eli had been able to add another verse to his dance poem, and Adelia was able to recite an additional verse of [Poetry of Sudden Change].

It was a great development, I decided, and then, as a test, I proposed some duels between the Masters.

It was Eli who has stepped up first, and a guy who would normally take care not to even so much as step on Arwen's shadow now pointed at her, challenging her to a duel so that they could see which way the wind was blowing.

I watched their duel with great interest, for it was between a Knight of the Ring and a Knight of the Heart.

Every time their swords clashed, Eli's Aura Blade was shattered. From the pale face of Eli, it was clear that he was pushing himself so hard that he would soon be vomiting blood.

The anxiety in his mind shone clear upon his face, and I saw that he was wondering whether he should recite [Poetry of the Full Moon] or not.

But his concern soon proved of no use, for before he could answer the question to himself, Arwen's sword touched his throat.

"That's enough," said I.

Arwen caught her breath for a brief moment and withdrew her sword. Eli bowed his head. I could see that he had a lot he wanted to say, but he did not want to show ill behavior in front of the woman he favored, so he held such words back.

If he had been a more normal man, he would not have found it strange that he had lost, for he had not recited his Muhunshi and also pushed himself too hard to attain victory.

"Would the results have been different, even if you had fully recited your dance poem? The level of experience and skill between the swordplay of you and Arwen is great," I told Eli as he chewed on his lips.

He said nothing, merely leaving the empty square that we were in and disappeared off somewhere.

Next was Adelia's turn.

Her swordplay was still lively, for she had not yet learned moderation, and I could see she was hesitant to step forward. But it was Arwen who asked me if she could duel with Adelia. I could see Adelia's assent in her gaze.

"Good," said I, "if it becomes dangerous, I'll intervene."

I put my hand on the hilt of my sword as I said this, and I cried out that the duel was about to start. Although she usually fought blindly on, Adelia was still a rare genius

when it came to the art of the sword.

And she had watched the battle between Eli and Arwen. Although I was not certain, I suspected that Adelia had figured out why Eli was defeated.

My guess proved correct, for Adelia had indeed been thinking on how to deal with Arwen in her own way after she had witnessed the defeat of Eli. However, the problem was that Adelia's method proved to be several times more radical than I had thought it would be.

"Ready your swords!"

As the duel began, Adelia chanted [Poetry of Sudden Change], and her sword glowed with a golden light.

"Damn crazy!" Adelia swore as she instantly blocked Arwen's first strike. Adelia angled her blade, and a golden beam of light flowed from it.

'Schka!' and as that uncomfortable noise rang out, Adelia's sword flashed as it struck into the ground.

'Kdwa!' the power of Sudden Change lost its direction and slammed into the cobbles of the empty courtyard.

Despite the fact that the power of her poem had been angled so as not to cause harm to Arwen, I had been forced to take a few steps back. As I was about to look at the spot where I had stood moments ago, Adelia threw her sword aside and ran to me.

"Your Highness!"

Her face was filled with great concern as to whether she had injured me by chance.

Seeing that pure face of hers, I looked down. The hole gouged in the ground was deep enough to bury a person in.

I was somewhat sickened by the sight of it. Then, as I loosened my tingling wrist, I started to organize the ranking of the Sword Masters in my mind.

Adelia went first, Arwen second, and Eli came in last. Not one of them was weak when compared with the other champions of the kingdom.

I was satisfied and laughed out loud and then set about continuing the work of verifying the strength of the others.

All the other knights were summoned, and it came to be that over five hundred knights gathered in the vacant courtyard and stared at me.

Some of them had the edges of their blades sharpened due to bearing an old grudge in their hearts, while others had eyes that flashed with anticipation.

As I looked at the once-broken knights and the erstwhile Silver Foxes, I stretched out my finger and motioned to one of them.

“Antoine, come out.”

The middle-aged mercenary had once been the leader of the Silver Fox Mercenary Company, but he had since become one of the many knights of Winter Castle. He came and stood before me.

“Show me what you have learned from the recent war,” I ordered Antoine.

Hopefully, this time it would not be some such a ridiculous song as ‘The Blade That Cuts the Knife.’

CHAPTER 170
FILLING THE WINEGLASS WITH BLOOD (2)

Antoine took his stance and held his hand upon his sword's hilt, his face brimming with confidence.

The more he quivered with arrogance, the more concerned I became. The memory flashed before my eyes of the mercenary commander who had once boasted of a verse as if it was a high treasure from heaven, and yet it proved so crude that it could barely be called a dance poem.

"Then I'll start," said Antoine as he drew his sword, his great arrogance clearly bringing him satisfaction.

'Chaha!' his sword aura bloomed over his blade as his qi noisily synthesized.

I recognized it as the swordsmanship of an Advanced Sword Expert, and it was a great improvement compared to when I had first met him. However, I didn't want to see a common sword aura. I wanted to hear was Antoine's poetry, the poetry that was unique to him.

He waited for a while as his energy began to run wild, with his sword aura rising in intensity, and once the concentration of his energy reached a peak, Antoine's lips began to move.

"I am the crimson blade that cuts the red sword!"

'Schwaak!' Antoine's sword blazed with a red light, and his face became flushed. His face turned almost as red as his sword.

I had expected more, and my expectations had been thrown to the wayside. My mood was clear to see on my face, yet Antoine didn't care about my feelings.

"Synthesize! Synthesize!" Red traceries appeared and disappeared before him, and he touched his heated face as I kept watching his loud demonstration.

Looking past the terrible lyrics of the poem, the power of Antoine's Muhunshi itself was quite good. There was a sense of dignity and promise to it, and I knew that it could break through the fervor of an orc warrior if he properly channeled it.

It was no more and no less than a [Extraordinary] level of poetry.

If it is properly polished and refined, it will proffer a useful level of power if one compares it to the Knights of the Ring.

The problem was the brevity of his poem, the fact that it focused on only a single moment. Still, he had gone through dozens of battles, and he had remained alive after facing dozens of orcs. Antoine even survived the battle against the great legion led by the king of the orcs.

Yet, his poetry spoke only of the moment of defeating the enemy that he faced, and this was a pity.

But I tried my best to suppress such a mindset, for different people use different strokes. While some look beyond to the end of a war, others focus only on the points of their swords.

Antoine was one of the latter types, and it would be an offense borne from my own arrogance if I dismissed him as being insignificant.

I opened my mind and looked for Antoine's strengths, and there was one: The utility gained from his crude song.

The poem's lyrics were simple, and the song was sung for a mere moment, so Antoine was not burdened by using the poem. That meant he could use the power of his poetry for an extended time, just like the man who was called the mercenary king and his [Golden Poem].

And this similarity was because Antoine's origin was no different than that of the mercenary king.

"Ah," and suddenly, a good idea entered my mind.

If it worked out well, I would be able to pass on a new poem to a man and his comrades who could only write crude lyrics with their minds.

However, it was paramount to check their achievements first.

After his demonstration, I asked Antoine about the employment of the [Poetry of True Soul] that I had passed on to the Silver Foxes in exchange for a twenty-year contract.

Antoine's face had been confident; it was now wracked by regret.

"It speaks of a mountain of dark green corpses and a pool of blood, so there's not a sense of relevancy in it to us – there is no continuity," came his answer.

It was at Winter Castle where battles against orcs are most frequent, so I had thought that the mercenaries would be able to digest the power of the poem to some extent, but the results weren't great.

Antoine once more had a quivering face, and I knew that he was like a weak ember that could not burn a single cloak, and the same held true for the other mercenaries.

Their poems, like Antoine's, were sung only to mark brief moments, and only a few of them had been able to properly draw out the power of the dance poem that I had passed on to them. And once the flames were lit, these few quickly had their energy exhausted, so it was impractical for them to use [Poetry of True Soul].

I was not disappointed, and even if it might be simple and clunky verses, they had still woven their own dance poems. And if they could do this, then I had a way in which to augment their power.

"You guys wait in one side."

I arranged Antoine and the other mercenary knights on one section of the courtyard and told the next group of men to step forward.

They were those who were once Knights of the Rings, who were now Knights of the Heart – the broken swords of the royal family. Their gazes were hostile, and they had little desire to be tested by me like Antoine and the other mercenaries. I experienced a strong resistance to my orders, and not one of them came to stand before me after repeated orders to do so.

"Hmm."

Then, Gwain stepped up. His mood toward me had not changed after our return to Leonberg, and the same counted for Trindall and Kampra.

“Do not be mistaken,” said Gwain, “I just want to have this done with so I can get some rest.”

He drew his sword, not giving me the chance to respond to his words.

‘Wooo~’

And the [Poetry of Shadows] he had woven in Dotrin’s forest came from his lips.

His sword turned black, and it was darker than before. The energy and spirit I felt contained in it were also far heavier, on a higher level incomparable to the past. Surviving the battle against the Overlord certainly had helped his development along.

‘Scchk~’ after the demonstration, Gwain immediately sheathed his sword and stepped back into the ranks of his comrades. As if having waited, Trindall stepped forward.

That was the beginning. After Gwain’s troupe had finished their demonstrations, the others decided that they would not be one-upped, and they came forward, one by one.

“I wrapped wind over my sword’s broken tip”

“Wind’s sound is the wailing of my blade”

And a wind blew as the knight recited his poem.

“A sword that once shook now stands upright”

“What can this sword not cut?”

And this knight’s sword seemed to stretch out, becoming longer.

“Even though a broken piece of iron it be”

“Hope alone will not hurt my foe”

Dozens of shrapnel-like lights flashed out from another knight's sword.

I carefully stored the powers of the poems and swordplay they demonstrated to me in my memory.

While the poems of the Silver Foxes had been simple but exciting, these knights have woven poems filled with abstraction and gloom.

The nature of the Silver Foxes' poetry was such that they could make the effects last for a long time, whereas the poetry of these knights, while difficult to maintain for long, had greater might blow by blow.

It was the result of the inherent difference between those who prioritize survival and those who are willing to sacrifice their own lives for victory.

After I had gone through all their poems, I stationed them across from the Silver Foxes.

I looked at those who remained: They were the natives of the north whose talents had been confirmed and who had then been accepted as knights. The songs they sang bore a strong resemblance to the military songs of Winter Castle, and some had even taken the verses of my war songs into their poems.

The karma and qi of these poems were also no different from [Poetry of True Soul]. The only difference was the color of the flames, as they blazed in red, yellow, or blue.

They were all [Extraordinary] dance poems.

In the end, I had checked all the dance poems of nearly five hundred knights and then grouped them all into different squadrons on the fly.

Those who hosted Death Knights, Gwain included, were gathered into a squadron, and I named them the [Dusk Knights].

The remaining royal knights were split into two squadrons, and I named them the [Dawn Knights] and [Twilight Knights].

The skilled mercenaries who had been able to become knights were called the [Silver Fox Knights], taking on their original company name.

The knight squadron composed of the native northerners was called the [Blizzard Knights].

Bernardo Eli was assigned the command of the Knights of Twilight, Dusk, and Dawn, while the Silver Fox and Blizzard Knights were placed under Arwen.

Although having been split between two commanders into mixed squadrons, there were no complaints.

After I had formed the five squadrons, I called the Silver Fox Knights forward.

“The payment I had given you the first time around has been of no use to you, so I will set up a new contract.”

In exchange for their promised twenty years of service, I handed them a new poem.

Their payment came in the form of the [Golden Poem] that was used throughout the life of the mercenary king, a man who had been mad for money.

Of course, I knew that it was almost impossible to make someone else’s dance poetry truly yours, but it didn’t matter if they couldn’t master it completely. All I was hoping for was that the [Golden Poem] would provide them with a source of power.

It was not a decision I would have normally taken. If it had been another dance poem, I would not have passed it to so many knights at once, even after waking up as a human. This was because the indiscriminate transmission of poetry inevitably undermines the character of the verse.

But in this case, I did not hesitate. As this was a poem about goddamned money, I could pass it on to thousands rather than hundreds of knights. And I was also taking my revenge by doing so.

I was still angry with the man who had dared to sell me. I still remembered it so clearly: The figure of the guy who had sold me for a pouch of gold without a moment’s hesitation, turning around and walking off.

I had known that he was crazy about money, but I had not expected that the extent of his greed was so great. And after all these centuries, my shock and anger remained just as raw as it had been then.

“Fuck him,” I swore, getting angry all over again. The Silver Fox Knights looked at me with amazement and then said that they liked the new poetry very much.

“Even if it’s not your poem, do as you wish with it,” I said, and the knights looked at me with some surprise.

Just like the mercenary king had sold me for some gold, so have I now sold his karma and qi to mercenaries in exchange for their contract. It was not a regrettable deal, and I rather enjoyed conducting it.

Once I was done dealing with the Silver Foxes, I looked at the Dawn, Dusk, and Twilight Knights. I was hoping to pass on a poem to them as well, a dance poem paired with the hearts of blood and death that they had formed within themselves.

It was a song perfect for scarred knights, yet it wasn’t time to share it just yet.

I would wait until the hatred in their hearts found a new target to direct itself at.

So, it would be after they arrived in the capital that they would take on the new poem.

* * *

Having finished the organization of the knights, I rushed to prepare for our departure from Winter Castle. And even while I made my preparations, the situation in the empire was constantly changing.

The Wyvern Knights, led by the King of Dotrin, have plunged the eastern part of the empire into chaos.

An imperial duke had fearlessly gathered an army and marched to subjugate Hwaryong, which was a good thing for me, as a few more once intact estates have been scorched away by the enraged fire dragon as a result.

((The imperial family has issued a severe warning to all nobles, saying that any family who takes the initiative and provokes Hwaryong will face the gravest punishment))

Montpellier’s voice from beyond the crystal ball was full of sorrow as if the world has collapsed.

And indeed, the current situation was not so different from the end of the world, for Hwaryong's wrath had been unleashed upon Montpellier's territory. It is said that most of his family members have been annihilated by fire, along with the castle they were in.

All that now remained for the Montpelliers were the several businesses that the family operated across the empire. The arrogant marquis was heartbroken.

Yet, such sorrow did not render him helpless, for as the situation worsened, Montpellier began to cooperate with me more actively. He was in regular contact with many highly-placed individuals in the empire so that he could tell me everything that was happening there. And he was meticulous in his reports, missing nothing.

It was natural; it was so natural.

With almost all of his imperial holdings lost, Montpellier was now faced with two options: Stay in the kingdom and keep the title of a capable ambassador, or return to the empire and risk the silent sword of the emperor.

The future he chose was the former.

((I will do my best. Please believe me this time))

The desperation in the voice flowing from the crystal sphere was clear.

((Damned emperor, motherfucker!))

So desperate was Montpellier that he cursed his Majesty the Emperor, and the marquis was creating all kinds of curse words to describe the imperial ruler.

Once upon a time, I had put a leash on Montpellier, and he had acted like my dog. Now, it really seemed as if he had become my loyal hound.

"We'll talk once I arrive there."

I made no promises regarding Montpellier's future, as there were too many people who have shed blood and tears because of the harm he had done to the kingdom.

If there was no other way for him to pay for such sins, I would kill him.

((I can only trust in your Highness's path. Long live Prince Adrian Leonberger! Long live the rising star of the kingdom!)) Montpellier screamed shrilly, and I removed my hand from the crystal ball.

And the next day dawned.

If one included the hundred ghostly Death Knights in the tally, six hundred knights and a hundred palace knights were lined up in front of the south gate. Fully armed rangers and the heavily armored arquebusiers were gathered there as well.

"Our preparations are over."

Nogisa and the other Masters surrounded me.

After we had passed through the south gate, Vincent said his goodbyes after riding out with us.

"Please go carefully," he told me.

"I will come back, and I will see you again," I greeted him.

"We wish your Highness the Crown Prince luck!" came the greeting of the rangers from behind me as we left Winter Castle. As we traveled, the extreme cold disappeared, and we entered the central region of Leonberg. The closer we got to the capital, the harder my heart beat in my chest.

I once held a conversation with my uncle shortly after I had seen the reality of the kingdom, and it now passed through my head.

"Uncle… I changed my mind."

I had told this to my uncle, whose eyes had stretched wide.

"I'm going to be the king."

Thus had I promised that I would revive this fallen kingdom.

CHAPTER 171
FILLING THE WINEGLASS WITH BLOOD (3)

The situation on the continent was changing rapidly.

When the empire, the superpower of the continent in name and reality, first declared the invasion of Dotrin, everyone accepted that the smaller country would be destroyed.

Everyone knew that the power and position of the empire was unsurpassed.

Indeed, immediately after the declaration of war, the empire showed its capability of mobilizing more than twenty legions. People had no doubts, believing that the imperial army would conquer the borders of Dotrin at once.

But it wasn't so, for the empire's first attempt at invasion ended in failure, and an abysmal failure it was.

All the fortresses that were taken with great difficulty collapsed upon the heads of the imperials, and even the precious sons of the imperial family died.

All the empire got was a piece of useless wasteland. It was a surprising result, but nothing changed, for people gave little praise to the smaller country and their battles. They said that, in the end, Dotrin would still be destroyed.

Once more, their predictions were soundly proven false.

One hundred thousand imperial troops gathered to make up for their previous devastating defeat. Yet, they could go no further than the forests. After that, the legions of imperial regulars who landed in the southern part of Dotrin were annihilated as well, excepting a few survivors.

Over such a short time, the imperial army had suffered more than 100,000 casualties, which was unacceptable.

It was a defeat that could not be ignored even if it was suffered by the huge empire

which reigned as the superpower upon the continent.

Nevertheless, the empire did not give up on its conquest of Dotrin.

News soon spread that the forces of the third invasion of Dotrin were going to sail to the kingdom, a true army consisting of the might of imperial knights and regular legions.

People predicted that Dotrin would be destroyed this time.

The regular legions were those under the direct command of the imperial family and were of better quality than the enlisted soldiers of the nobles who had failed in the previous two invasions.

Yet, the third invasion did not even begin, for a monster suddenly appeared and destroyed the southern part of the empire. The entire army of the third conquest who was waiting to head to Dotrin was vaporized.

Then, a duke's army set out, full of pluck, and was wiped out while trying to defeat the monster. So it came to be that even those southern families lucky enough to escape the initial disaster were destroyed by the enraged dragon.

And among those now-extinct families was the family of the Marquis of Montpellier, imperial ambassador.

The nobles of Leonberg talked all day about the fall of the marquis.

"In fact, should the Montpellier family be considered as nobles, now that they don't exist?"

"The marquis is still the imperial ambassador, and behind him is the emperor."

"No, the empire will send a new ambassador. The only question is when."

"Ah, the news reaches us slowly here. There is a rumor that his benevolent Imperial Majesty is very sorry about the bad luck that has struck the Montpellier family. So, he has strengthened the marquis's authority as an ambassador to make up for the loss of his holdings."

The nobles who lounged in their mansion in Leonberg's capital eagerly praised the

emperor and spoke of the possibility that his plenipotentiary ambassador would become the de facto governor of the kingdom.

Theirs was unscrupulous behavior that lacked the pride and awareness that a true nobleman of Leonberg should possess. And none of them saw the empire's crisis as a grave one, for even while the upstarts of Dotrin and their army swept over the empire's east, and even if a terrible monster has settled itself in the south, they believed that the time would come when all in Leonberg would kneel before the great power that was the empire.

Perhaps that is why their idle concerns revolved around whether Montpellier would be dismissed and replaced, or, as rumored, if he would instead take office as Governor of Leonberg.

They knew that they had to be aware of the rapidly changing political climate so that their families could continue to enjoy the same prosperity that they enjoyed now.

And in the midst of all that, the monarch of Leonberg issued a decree that made no distinction between east, west, north, or south. What was scary about the decree issued by the king, whose family lacked both teeth and nails, was that it could not be ignored. The rumors ran that the reason for the issuing of the edict was related to the throne itself.

The royal family of Leonberg remained a royal family, even if these nobles did not take the Leonbergers too seriously.

Additionally, the imperial ambassador had also urged that the nobles come to the capital as soon as possible to discuss future affairs. The nobles had no choice but to lift their heavy asses and leave their castles.

Those who were weak or old rode in carriages, and those with strength went on horseback.

So it came to be that all the nobles of the kingdom flocked to the royal road.

"Finally, the Second Prince Maximilian will ascend the throne."

"Because he has a mild personality, the future of Leonberg is truly bright."

"Honestly, his Majesty is a bit sensitive, so I was sometimes embarrassed. I believe

his Highness the Second Prince will listen more to the loyal advice of we nobles."

They did not doubt that the second prince, known as the founding king's reincarnation, would succeed to the throne.

"Then what will happen to the first prince?"

The moment that one of the nobles mentioned the eldest son of the royal family, the expressions of the others hardened.

"Remember, there is all that speak of him ending the war in the north, and his relationship with the Marquis of Montpellier is a close one. Above all, he is the firstborn of the royal family."

It was as the noble said: The first prince could not be lightly dismissed, for his name has spread across the kingdom over the past few years.

"But what has he done of late?"

The first prince, who had caused incidents and accidents every day of his life, has not appeared in public for more than a year. Some nobles said that the king himself had confined Prince Adrian to the palace for sullying the mission of the diplomatic envoy, humiliating imperial knights, and damaging the peace between the two countries. Others said that the prince had left for the north and would remain there.

"Actually, you have a point. His Highness's character is a little… it isn't right."

"The rumors go that the first prince has become very hostile toward us because he can't shake off his past. In the end, he should have realized that it is we who are supporting the royal family."

"I'm asking this, and I have to ask it: Why does the prince hate us so much? Is there any reason? It's as if he can't remember why he hates us, so he just hates us. It's really unfair."

Once this can of worms was opened, the nobles rebuked the first prince without hesitation. They talked as if the kingdom would be immediately destroyed if he succeeded to the throne.

"Well, it's not wrong to say it. If his Highness gains the throne, he will not know how

to run the kingdom, and the damage done to our families will be inevitable," the one noble replied, adding that the support of a fool like the Marquis of Bielefeld or even the noble Count Kirgayen was not a significant factor.

Meanwhile, Siorin Kirgayen and Bielefeld were having their own discussion.

"The nobles are firmly convinced that the second prince will gain the throne."

"Those with flaps over their eyes see only what they want to see. Thanks to this, his Majesty has deceived them without effort," said Bielefeld, and a spiteful smirk came to his aged face.

"You look happy," observed Siorin.

"I do? Does it look like it?" the marquis said with a smile and asked, "What about you?"

"Honestly, I am afraid. The path his Highness takes is a hard one, and the fact that so much blood will flow upon it terrifies me. I mean, it's a mess. But in the end, my greatest fear is that my precious daughter will get hurt," Count Kirgayen said as his face became flushed.

"Never fear, for we are noblemen who will care for the future of the kingdom all our lives. Is this not so?" urged Bielefeld.

"Okay, okay. Yes, you're right," the count said with a sigh.

"So put aside your worries about your daughter and the kingdom, even if only for today, and enjoy a drink with me."

The Marquis of Bielefeld held his glass of red wine aloft and toasted, "For the future of the kingdom."

"May God bless the future of the kingdom," said Count Kirgayen as he too lifted his glass.

'Kleeeng~' a clear sound echoed in the room as they clinked their glasses.

'Dang~! Dang~! Dang~! Dang~!' and just then, the urgent sound of a ringing bell was heard.

The marquis and the count had barely put their glasses to their lips, and they arose from their seats at the same time.

“My lord marquis!” and in the next moment, Bielefeld’s knight ran into the room and said, “The northern army has advanced upon the capital!”

* * *

Siorin Kirgayen spat as he stood on the wall which surrounded the capital. Thousands of troops were lined up upon the plain, and they were fully armed, seeming as if they would assault the capital at once.

Countless flags of northern families fluttered, and in the middle of the army flew the banner of the crouching lion.

“Well, every time I look at it, it feels as if my heart is torn from my chest,” said Siorin, shaking his head as he stared at the horses gathered under the lion banner.

“That’s why I like his Highness! No one in the capital shows such ambition,” said Bielefeld as he laughed. In contrast to Siorin, he was delighted to see the thousands of troops lined up, spears and swords at the ready.

So loud did the old man laugh that the guards upon the wall, who had been looking at the northern army with tense faces, looked back at Bielefeld.

“What is this? Surely… can it be?”

And not far off, other nobles looked beyond the walls with anxious faces, depressed by the great army they saw.

The tightly shut gates of the capital told these nobles that the current situation was not a matter that was arranged between the first prince and the royal family.

The tense defenders, the shut gates – a single thought entered the minds of these nobles: Rebellion.

A prince who did not wish for his brother to be king has come to usurp the throne by force. They believed this to be the case.

“It is a royal messenger!” someone shouted. And as everyone looked back, they saw a

knight in golden armor ride upon the capital's highway toward the gate.

'chukuduku~ chukuduku~ chukuduku~'

The knight, carrying a royal banner, then climbed the wall.

"His Highness the prince is commanded by his Majesty to enter the capital alone!" the knight shouted down loudly. Prince Adrian steered his horse to the front of the city gate.

"Open the gate!" and by order of the palace knight, the gate guards opened the gate in haste.

'Krrk! Krrk!'

The prince passed through it.

'Kadwa!' the gated thudded shut.

"His Majesty has given one more command!" shouted the royal messenger, loud enough for all upon the wall to hear him. "All nobles and royals in the capital are to go to the king's hall! Immediately!"

The knight's voice was firm. The nobles realized that the king would brook no dissent, so they headed to the royal palace.

"This might be serious. It seems that the first prince finally shows his true, disgusting face."

"Send word to the Templars. In the worst case, his Highness the Second Prince and the Marquis of Montpellier can escape the city."

The nobles' messengers scattered in all directions. In a time of such tumult, the usually peaceful capital became filled with noise.

* * *

The Battle of Leonberg Palace

All the nobles of the kingdom who had come to the capital gathered in the hall, and

they stood talking in groups about the radical actions of the prince.

“If it is true, then why did he enter the capital alone? Is he mad?”

“The first prince is said to be a Sword Master. I think he believes that no one can do him any harm.”

“Then, he is stupid! We all know how powerful the palace knights are.”

It seemed that the nobles had already accepted the prince’s rebellion as a given, and as they talked, not one of them showed respect or honor toward the eldest son of the royal family.

“The legitimate heir of his Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the humble ruler of the Leonberg Kingdom and more honorable than anyone else, the eldest son of the Leonberger royal family, his Highness Adrian Leonberger, First Prince, enters! Bow down to his worthy personage!”

The moment that the royal chief of staff cried this out, the nobles shut their mouths and bowed their heads, as if they wanted to. Those that did make eye contact rapidly lowered their heads in fear that anything would happen.

‘jrkf~ jrkf~’ only the footsteps of the prince echoed in the silence.

‘chin~’ and the prince’s footsteps stopped.

The nobles raised their heads and saw that the prince stood right in front of the dais upon which the throne was placed. His back was turned to them, so they couldn’t see his expression.

Then, the royal chief of staff cried out again.

“His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the humble ruler of the Leonberg Kingdom and more honorable and wise than anyone else, enters! Show all courtesy and respect worthy to the monarch of the kingdom!”

The nobles knelt again and bowed their heads, not given the chance to organize their thoughts.

Through the hall echoed the sounds of the court knights’ sabatons stepping upon the

floor and the sound of the king's cloak dragging behind him.

"Everyone, lift your heads," came the voice of the king.

The nobles raised their heads and saw the king sitting upon his throne, silently looking down upon those gathered in the hall.

The king had aged rapidly in the past two years, yet his eyes were more focused than ever before.

"I will tell this to you in a straightforward manner. The reason that I have gathered you all here today is to cut out the rotten part of the kingdom."

The nobles thought that the king was referring to the first prince as this putrid part, and they believed that the evil prince would be done away with on this day for the sake of the eternal well-being of the royal family.

But that wasn't the case.

"And I am going to entrust the prince with my wish to rip out the festering parts from my kingdom."

The king came down from the dais and handed a sword to the prince.

"Can you do it?" the king asked.

"I believe I can," Prince Adrian replied.

A high lord could no longer stand the tense atmosphere, so he came out and asked the king, "Sire! Please tell me what is rotten in the kingdom, for I also want to give my strength to his Highness the Prince."

The king did not answer. He merely looked down at all those in the hall with an impassive face.

Then the prince turned around, and the nobles were finally able to see his face.

Prince Adrian was laughing. It was a very cold and ferocious laugh. One aristocrat had been quick to notice the unusual atmosphere, and he had begun to step back toward a door in the hall without anyone noticing him. Suddenly, something cold

touched his back, and he turned around: The palace knights were blocking the doors.

“No one leaves here without his Majesty’s permission.”

As the nobles turned their heads and heard the words of the palace knight, they realized who the rotten parts were that needed to be cut away for the sake of Leonberg’s future.

“Those who have no reason to be ashamed, look to the ceiling, and stand still.”

The prince drew his sword.

“Because this sword has no eyes, I am afraid that it will also harm the loyal ones among you.”

The prince’s face was the exact mirror of his words.

Still, no matter how happy Prince Adrian looked, some of the weaker-willed nobles had pissed their pants.

CHAPTER 172
FILLING THE WINEGLASS WITH BLOOD (4)

The nobles stiffened, and none of them moved.

Some of them didn't think of moving because they were terrified, while others looked at the ceiling to prove that they had nothing to be ashamed about. The hall was silent.

'Ump~' came the sound of someone's dry throat gulping.

"I see no one is moving, so it looks like no one here has sinned," said the first prince. "The future of the kingdom is so very bright."

It was with an exaggerated tone and gestures that the prince praised the kingdom's bright future.

It was an obvious mockery.

The nobles still stood in silence. Even the high lords of the realm did not protest or raise any objections.

"But it's all so weird," the prince tilted his head, "If everyone is so pure, where does this rotten stench that fills my nose come from?"

The prince's gaze shifted to the left.

"Where the hell does it come from?"

The nobles blinked and trembled.

"I'm saying it's real nasty, this smell."

The prince now glanced to the right, and the nobles there hurriedly closed their eyes.

'Chik,' the prince started walking.

‘Kscchhh~’ the tip of his sword scratched over the hall’s floor, and it keened with a loud sound.

‘Kchaa aah~’

Every time that the prince moved, the nobles trembled as they heard that horrifying noise.

One of the weaker nobles could no longer bear to withstand the pressure.

“Huh, now the royal family is persecuting innocent nobles? This- This is by no means a court, so let us speak, lest the will of us nobles is misrepresented toward the royal family.”

As the noble’s voice echoed through the hall, the noise of the sword scratching over the floor stopped.

The prince now stood before the noble.

“The rot is right here.”

The noble’s face was ashen pale.

“This is a disgrace to my family’s generations of dedication and service…” the nobleman, who had desperately been trying to bring his family’s hard work to the prince’s notice, stopped talking.

His gaze shifted to the prince’s sword, and a small rivulet of blood was flowing down the blade. The noble stroked his neck, and as his fingertips stroked over his old, wrinkled skin, they encountered a foreign texture.

The noble’s fingers touched his lips, and now there was no question that the liquid flowing onto his teeth was bright red blood that had bubbled from his neck.

The whites of his eyes showed, and then- ‘Schik! Dugudud~’ his eyes stretched wide as his bloody, severed head rolled over the floor.

‘Passsususu!’ the blood fountained from his gaping neck one instant later.

“Oah! Haoh!”

“Get it off me!”

Nobles who were spattered by the warm liquid cried out as they slumped to the floor.

“Ahh!”

“What is this!”

Some of the pale-faced nobles manage to voice protests.

“No matter what you say, you cannot do this! None may harm a nobleman without a legal trial!”

“His family has been loyal and devoted to the kingdom for generations! How can you kill him without naming a crime!”

Some of the terrified nobles now more vehemently denounced the act.

“The royal family has decided to annihilate the nobility!”

“The king and prince are utterly mad!”

So terrified were some of them that they spoke before realizing what they were saying.

“You can’t treat us like this! Let’s all join forces and resist this royal violence!”

Some nobles agitated the others with sharp words of outright treason.

“Did you ask me to name a crime?” a soft voice pierced through that great turmoil, and it was the voice of the prince. He was no longer smiling.

“As lords, you did not take proper care of your people. Your sin is that you made them bend over as you robbed and abused them.”

The tumult of the aristocrats ended as that soft and cold voice struck like a storm.

“And you have committed the sin of leaking the secrets of the kingdom and dealing with foreign nobles for your personal gain!”

Energy flowed from the prince's body, and it raged like a storm.

"You have sold your souls through the sin of forgetting your secret oaths! Through the sin of serving two masters!"

The nobles were rattled and shaken as they faced the dignity and anger of the prince's energy.

"You were born as nobles, but you have forgotten your duty! You were born as humans, but you lived like beasts!"

As the prince saw those nobles, he rounded on them all and declared, "That's why you die here today!"

The nobles began to shout again as they heard the prince sentencing them so.

"I have not betrayed the kingdom! One of my confidentials leaked the secrets!"

There were those who denied their sins.

"What can a noble in a powerless country do? If I have committed sin, I have done so to live!"

Some argued that their actions were rational and justifiable.

"You dare do this, even with his Majesty's permission!? Please! Face the reality of the kingdom and wake from your dreams!"

Others screamed that both the king and the prince were delusional and over-ambitious.

"If Ambassador Montpellier knows what is happening now, he will not rest before justice is done!"

The moment the name of the empire was uttered, the attitude of the nobles who had been clamoring in fear suddenly changed.

"I am an imperial baron! I have made an oath to his Majesty the Emperor, even if by letter! Little princes of small countries cannot harm me!"

“I too am a sworn vassal of his Imperial Majesty! I am a proud nobleman, listed on the Imperial Nobel Charter itself!”

And once one of them has shouted this, the nobles began to fight back, proclaiming that they were both nobles of the kingdom and vassals serving the emperor.

“Our only sin is to be born as nobles of a small country, forced to serve an incompetent monarch! The empire gives us new opportunities, and our choices were made for a better future!”

More than half of the aristocrats gathered in the hall declared their apostasy with great confidence. Their faces showed no shame.

The prince did not raise a single eyebrow. He merely turned his head to the king who sat upon his throne and asked, “Do you still think my method is radical?”

The king spoke but did not answer the prince’s question.

“Your treason is a failing of my virtues. You became hard because Leonberg was weak, and the royal family could not protect you. So I implore you: If you admit your past mistakes and declare your allegiance, even now, I will give you a chance to remain part of this realm.”

Instead, in a somber tone, the king urged the nobles to fall upon their knees and confess their sins. His voice had an edge of hope as he told them it was not too late for their absolution.

However, the nobles merely ridiculed the king’s mercy.

“Rather than living as a servant of a small country, I will live with pride as a nobleman of a great country!”

“Is there truly no loyalty? Is there nothing in your hearts?” the king asked.

The nobles grumbled as they heard the king’s grief-filled voice.

“If the royal family officially apologizes for today’s affront, and if a reasonable payment is given, I will consider it. But I wonder: Does the royal family have the ability to adequately reward us, to buy our hearts?”

The nobles sympathized with these words.

The king was about to speak when the first prince stepped forward and spoke first.

“Sire,” the prince whispered and shook his head.

The king gave a long sigh and shut his eyes tightly. And when he opened those eyes, there no longer sat an aggrieved king upon the throne.

“The prince can do whatever the prince wants to do. I wash my hands in the matter, my involvement ends,” came the quiet voice of the old king.

And so it was, for the prince stepped away from the king and ordered, “Knights of the Palace!”

The palace knights stepped up at once.

“Secure them,” commanded the prince.

“If you so much as touch a tip of my hair- Uh!?”

The startled nobles shouted and protested, but when they saw the knights pass them by, they frowned.

‘Shuck~ Shuck~’

The palace knights went to stand before the nobles who had all gathered in a corner, away from the renegades and traitors who had mocked the king.

“We will serve Leonberg until the end of our days,” one of these nobles said.

“Please follow,” a palace knight said to them. Under the guidance of the knights, the Marquis of Bielefeld and Count Kirgayen as well the lesser nobles who had watched the tumult unfold headed to the dais.

It wasn’t difficult for the renegades to recognize the difference between themselves and the nobles being led to the king, for they were the royalist nobles, Bielefeld and Siorin included, as well as the lords of provinces who had no ties with forces outside of Leonberg.

Unlike the renegades, none of them have been chosen by the empire.

Up till this moment, the dissenters had laughed at these nobles, saying that they were not resourceful and were slow to see which way the current flowed. They were the nobles who, despite seeing blood spilled on this day, had not clamored in terror.

“I despise the actions taken today. I’ve already sent out a messenger to the Marquis of Montpellier, and he will soon arrive. When he does, you Leonbergers will have to worry about how to pay for the sin of persecuting us innocent nobles,” said one lord. The renegades firmly believed that once Montpellier arrived, the day’s turmoil would draw to an end.

However, no matter how much time passed, the Marquis of Montpellier did not appear.

Instead, the messenger sent by the lord was dragged in, bloodied.

“You cannot cover the sun with ten fingers! The marquis will soon know of this! There is no place in Leonberg that is beyond his gaze!” the lord shouted as he saw this.

The prince beckoned, and the palace knights threw the bloody messenger in front of the dissenters.

“You idiot!” shouted the lord, “You couldn’t do one simple errand properly! You got caught!”

The messenger shook his head at his master’s words.

“The mission didn’t fail, m’lord. I met the marquis and told him everything. He said that he knew it all before I came to tell him.”

“Has he heard? See! There is no place in this kingdom without the eyes and ears of the empire. So, stop dreaming your vain dreams and-“

“No…”

The renegade lord frowned at the sudden interruption of his messenger. The servant would’ve normally stayed quiet at a time like this, yet he now started talking in a desperate, despite his master’s displeasure.

“After saying that, his Excellency the Marquis said he does not dare interfere with a monarch exercising his rightful authority. And then… then he said, just so that there were no useless misunderstandings, that you have to deal with your own problems! After that, his servant beat me, m’lord!”

As the messenger explained the situation, the nobles stiffened where they stood. None of them understood what Montpellier’s reply meant, and the anxiety and fear that had been driven away by the reliance on imperial prestige now returned.

“Well, if something happens to us today, my family will take action! If you don’t wish to see the whole kingdom become a battlefield, then cease what you have done up to now!” one of the high lords said as he stepped forward.

However, the high lord’s threats could not even reassure himself, for he had lost the shield of the empire behind which he had hidden. And his threat did not make his opponents wither.

“I appreciate your loyalty in hoping the kingdom does not become a battlefield,” said the prince with a crooked smile, “But I’ll tell you now: Your worries are useless. The war you speak of has already begun.”

Unlike the prince’s smile, his words were grave.

“The forces of the Balahards and the elite soldiers of the Central Legion should be busy making your family’s castle an empty ruin by now.”

The renegades grew pale as they heard the prince’s words, and he laughed out loud as he saw their shock.

He laughed as if he could no longer contain his excitement.

‘Scha~’ the prince stopped laughing and raised his sword, his face without expression.

“Now, wait! I changed my mind! It’s impossible to heal the spirit of the kingdom through civil wa-“

The Aura Blade flashed before the high lord could finish speaking.

“Regardless of what his Majesty would’ve said, I never had any intention of keeping

you alive," the prince said coldly. The headless body of the high lord slumped to the floor. The nobles screamed as they watched the twitching corpse.

"Ahhh!"

"Save me! Spare me!"

And as those screams rang out, the prince jumped into the group of nobles.

"I'm sorry! I am!"

Those who were once proud nobles of Leonberg were now mere traitors on death row, and throughout the hall did their pleas for life echo.

And as they screamed, prince and sword both danced a bloody dance through them.

Blood stained the palace hall.

* * *

In the crimson hall, a hundred heads were piled beneath the dais.

The king looked at the severed head with a dry expression, for none of those who had died had repented their sins. All their faces were distorted by fear and the desire to continue their filthy lives.

"All of them are accounted for," said the prince. He then stepped forward and returned the royal sword which had been handed to him.

The king took the sword and stared at its bloody blade, and then said in a weary voice, "Hang their heads in the city's plaza so that all can see. Write down their deeds and nail up the papers so that the world will know of all their sins."

Upon the king's order, the palace knights stepped forward and started to put the heads in sacks.

The king watched as the knights dragged out the bloody sacks, and once they were gone, he turned to the surviving nobles.

"Now, only you are left."

In an instant, the Marquis of Bielefeld threw himself flat to the floor as he heard the king's voice, a voice that had grown old and weary.

"We are also sinners! The kingdom groaned under the empire's boot, but when we saw this, we averted our eyes and shut our ears from the blasphemy that was being done toward the royal family! As nobles of Leonberg, our failure to fulfill our duties has caused the same peril as those who have committed treason! We deserve death as well!"

Bielefeld did not care about getting blood on his body as he knelt there and cried out with a pained voice.

"To this day, your Majesty has struggled to govern a kingdom full of traitors and weaklings! I, Siorin Kirgayen, the sinner, will die with joy! Please, punish me!"

The surviving nobles all fell on their faces and condemned themselves.

A small ray of light returned to the old king's weary face.

"Their deaths are enough," came the prince's voice. "There were many willing to sacrifice their lives for this land four hundred years ago, but there were no nobles. There were kings and knights who were determined to protect their people."

The king turned his head, looking at the eldest son who he had once hated and discarded, who had since become indispensable to the kingdom: The prince shined like the sun, even though he was drenched in blood.

And so dazzling was that light that the king was inspired by it, and he could not stop himself from getting up from his throne. Standing on the dais, the king raised his sword up high.

"Everyone, hear me!" he shouted. "From this day on, the Kingdom of Leonberg severs all ties with the empire!"

When the king had been young, he had always carried this desire in his heart.

"Leonberg will do its best to reclaim all that has been stolen from it!"

He now said the words he could not say before, always being afraid that the empire's ears might hear.

“And we shall finally be reborn as a country with the full glory of our past shining into the future!”

For decades, the king had desired to shout these words.

“If necessary, this war will be eternal!”

The proclamation of King Lionel Leonberger echoed through the hall.

CHAPTER 173
FILLING THE WINEGLASS WITH BLOOD (5)

The Marquis of Bielefeld opened his mouth and started to stutter.

“Lo… Long…” his voice trembled, unable to bear the passion, “Long live the kingdom!” he then shouted as tears flowed from his wrinkled eyes.

“Long live Leonberg!” Count Kirgayen cried out in passion, following the marquis.

“Long live the Leonberger royal family!”

“Long live his Majesty the King!”

The nobles shouted one after the other, their voices filling the hall.

The king struggled to calm his wildly jumping heart as he sheathed his sword. Then, he raised his hand and stopped the cheering of the nobles.

“Marquis Bielefeld, step forward.”

Upon hearing the king’s words, the old man knelt beneath the dais.

“I appoint you as Marshal of the Kingdom.”

The old man raised his head and looked at the king, and despite the passion in the monarch’s eyes, his face was still darkly set.

In the past, the empire had divided the armies of Leonberg into sections so that the royal family could not unite them into a single force. This made them impossible to lead effectively, and so the position of marshal became obsolete and was done away with.

And now, nearly a hundred years later, the great army of Leonberg has been reborn.

“Let the marquis reorganize our army, which has been disbanded by the empire. Let

the armies of Leonberg, divided into five, unite once more!"

"Your Majesty, I will do my best."

Bielefeld's face looked as if he greatly relished the prospect of his new appointment, and the king patted him on the shoulder.

"I believe you will do well."

The king then almost whispered for Count Kirgayen to step forward.

"I appoint Count Kirgayen as the prime minister of the kingdom."

The post of prime minister was also a position that has been disbanded by the empire.

That had been the beginning.

The king successively called the nobles to him to take on new positions and new organizations.

All were organizations that had been dismantled or privately taken over by the empire. The nobles praised the king with tears in their eyes and enthusiasm in their hearts.

"The years of sin and indolence shall be no more, but our immediate difficulties are indescribable. However, if you show dedication and passion, you will be able to overcome these challenges."

"We will give it our hearts!" the nobles knelt with their foreheads touching the floor.

The king looked at those in the royal hall. His gaze settled upon his eldest son, who was standing with his back against the wall of a corner in the hall and looking at the nobles.

The king's heart was complicated, for it still felt too awkward to speak dearly with his son, and he was too embarrassed to say that he had been an incompetent father. Nevertheless, the emotion that settled in his eyes was very gentle and firm.

"Adrian Leonberger."

‘Stk,’ the prince stopped leaning his back against the wall.

“Come stand before me.”

At this, the prince slowly walked over and went to stand before the dais, straightening his back. Where everyone had knelt and paid their homage, it was only the prince who stood so proudly before the throne.

The king almost laughed, for even after having been summoned by the monarch, the prince had slowly approached and not even paid the respect due to the monarch. And how rough he looked, with his hair messy and his clothes bloody! If this had been the past, the king would not have liked the prince’s messy appearance and arrogant attitude, and the nobles would’ve shouted at the prince for his disrespect.

But such was not the case now: The king even felt proud of how the prince carried himself. If Prince Adrian had bowed at the waist before an incompetent father, then he would’ve bowed before the emperor as well.

“Tell me,” said the prince, and out of everything he could’ve said, all he did was urge his father to say what he wished to say.

The king gave a cry of joy and started laughing.

They were in a hall with floors still stained red by the blood of traitors, and it was an important moment in which everyone was determined to prepare themselves for the hardships they were to face in the future.

The king could not stop himself from laughing.

“We are truly the same,” said the king.

“You’ve said that before,” came his eldest son’s reply, and the king suddenly recalled a conversation they had a few years back.

“I see that you don’t even greet someone if they are your father. It seems that people who have passed close to the doors of death don’t always change.”

There had been a time when the king had quarreled and shouted with his eldest son, who had barely survived the piercing of a sword into his stomach.

The king still recalled those events in his heart, but as he thought about it now, he realized that he hadn't needed to speak so harshly with a child who had nearly died.

"First, tell me what you wish to tell me," the First Prince asked the king, who was about to apologize.

The king smiled and said to his son, "Adrian Leonberger, I name you the Crown Prince."

The matter had already been decided, but this was the first time that it was revealed in a public setting.

All the nobles' eyes widened, and all caught their breaths.

"Thank you."

The prince's answer was simple, and it might have been profound, yet the nobles wondered whether it was truly inspiring. It rather seemed as if it was a regression to his past behavior, and in some ways, it seemed a bit annoying to the nobles. But it certainly didn't seem to bother the king, who suspected that his next proclamation might elicit a greater response from the prince.

"To the Crown Prince, I now bestow the title of the Golden Lion."

The nobles raised their heads.

"If he is a golden lion-"

"The name as you think of it is correct," the king interrupted Bielefeld.

"Huh," said the old man, and the other nobles were a bit flustered. Only the prince was in the dark, not knowing what the title of Golden Lion entailed.

Bielefeld stepped up and started explaining its meaning to the prince.

"The titles of Regent and Golden Lion are both unique positions in Leonberg, both done away with by the empire when-"

"Briefly, please," said the prince.

“It is a position where, in almost any circumstance, you can make judgments and decisions without the need for royal authorization. You are, so to speak, appointed as his Majesty’s agent vested with absolute power. In fact, your authority and position will be little different from that of the monarch.”

The prince’s eyes stretched wide, and as the old noble looked at him, he spoke on.

“Only five persons have ever been granted the title of Golden Lion in the history of Leonberg, and they had been trusted, even by successive monarchs, who-“

“Hmm, that’s enough. You can stop,” the king said with a cough, cutting short Bielefeld’s explanation.

The king then said, in a rather rushed tone, “As it is the only position which allows one to exercise the same authority as the king, the responsibility is great indeed. Your resilience must be great as well, so do not blame me if you fail.”

The prince gave no answer, for he realized that being the Golden Lion was as good as being Regent, and this was something that made him think.

Of course, the Regent was appointed only in times of emergency, whereas the Golden Lion served in his position while the king still lived. So great was the power and authority granted by the title that the Golden Lion could arbitrarily pronounce death upon high-ranking nobles.

It was like having two kings in a single country, and the title was created in ages past because the successive kings of Leonberg had so many family members.

“Is your Majesty thinking about the royal family?” the Marquis of Bielefeld asked, aware of the history of the title.

The king nodded at once. “There is nothing you cannot do if you need it done,” he then told the prince.

The hall had been filled with words; now, it grew silent once more. It was only now that the nobles knew of the king’s determination, and they realized that the war was not a possibility, but a certainty.

“It will not be easy to reclaim that which we have lost in ages past. You all should immediately, without delay, set about rebuilding the collapsed organizations

assigned to you," the king ordered the nobles and then drove them from his hall.

* * *

"Your face tells me that you have a lot to say," the king said as he watched the Marquis of Bielefeld, who was the only person who had remained behind.

"It is only that his Highness the Crown Prince, whose nature is to closely scrutinize matters, does not know that your Majesty has omitted many from the list of traitors."

The king nodded as he heard the marquis speak.

"You are right. I knowingly omitted the names of some of them."

"Is it then possible for them to absolve their sins?"

"It's not like that. I know well that they were not only given imperial titles but that their treasonous acts and sins are not so different from the ones committed by those beheaded today."

"Then, if…"

The king looked at the face of the fearful marquis and said, "My son said that no nobles are needed in this country. He said that it is enough to have those who are willing to sacrifice their lives. I think differently."

It had been the nobles who had actually ruled Leonberg in the past hundred years since the start of the royal family's decline. The power of the royal family was not the same as it had been, so if you cut all the corrupted parts from the kingdom at once, it could lead to an unpleasant situation. No matter how strong the northmen and the central army are, it is not possible for them to keep order over the entire kingdom.

"The survivors will be relieved that they survived after they see those who have been beheaded. Right now, they will observe the situation rather than plan a rebellion. Maybe they will consider the fact that they too could have been beheaded, and so start to actively contribute to the goals of the royal family."

"Theirs is a vulgar nature that will soon be revealed, a foul greed that will harm the kingdom," Bielefeld gave voice to his fears.

“Do not question my will,” the king said softly, “I’m not trying to embrace them, but I have to keep them alive. The commander of the palace knights sent me a letter. He wrote that the eldest and younger sons sent by the nobles serve at Winter Castle with greater faith than had been expected from them. Their temperaments have been winnowed and reformed in the blizzards of the north, and they are now truly noble. The commander has only praise for them.”

The marquis widened his eyes as he heard this.

“Before we break the roots of the rotting tree, we have to consider the healthy fruit which it has begun to bear. We must hope that the prince treats them well.”

Only then did Bielefeld understand the king’s will, and he nodded. Still, his concern remained.

“But these traitor nobles are the ones who will do great harm to the kingdom in the future.”

“There is nothing to worry about. Their deaths have only been delayed for a very short time.”

The king’s eyes brightened.

“They will die, and externally, it will seem as if they die as loyalists and not traitors.”

As Bielefeld looked at the old, burden-filled eyes of the king, he asked, “I am but a foolish old man, so it is hard for me to even guess your Majesty’s plans.”

“As soon as we have arranged things here on the rear, those nobles will be heading to the border. They will be with me.”

The king did not say whether he would force them to fight and die upon the field of battle, whether he himself would face the turmoil of battle or whether he was planning something else.

“All I hope is that Leonberg will be liberated, at least in the time of the next generation.”

The king then said that he did not know whether he would live to see that day, and his face became sunken as he said this.

“Your Majesty’s name will echo across the world as the harbinger of the era of light.”

The king did not respond to such words of praise.

He just sat on the throne and prayed that a time of freedom would soon dawn.

* * *

One hundred stakes were raised on the capital’s plaza, and a head was placed upon each one of these poles. They were the heads of those nobles beheaded in the palace.

The citizens of the capital were terrified by this sudden political upheaval. Palace knights were dispatched to tell the citizens not to be afraid as they listed the crimes committed by those who have been beheaded.

“Have you ever seen a more embarrassing sight!”

Those citizens who learned that all were traitors who had been given imperial titles became enraged and spat on the ground.

“Ugh!”

The citizens then noticed the nearby palace knights and became afraid because nobles were still nobles, and they did not know how the knights would react. However, the palace knights did not begrudge the citizens for their behavior; all they did was nail a parchment to each pole and went on their way.

“Beasts lower than the lowest of humans!”

“These fat bastards got hungry, so they crawled to the empire!”

The courageous citizens spat on the heads of the traitors and threw mud at them.

As the next day dawned, there came to stand more stakes with more freshly severed heads upon the plaza, for those citizens and merchants who had been affiliated with the traitor nobles had been hunted overnight, and their heads removed. The palace knights sorted the matter out, punishing the criminals who had intervened with the royal event in the span of a day.

A few days later, a noble who held the post of Minister of Justice appeared before

people gathered upon the great plaza and declared the independence of the kingdom, which had become a de facto imperial province.

The northern armies had camped around the capital, but in time, they scattered in all directions. It wasn't difficult to guess where these soldiers, fully armored and bearing swords and spears, were heading.

Shortly after they left, Leonberger's declaration of independence spread across the continent.

CHAPTER 174
THE LAZY WOLF, THE SHEEP WAITING FOR TIME (1)

The kingdom of Leonberg was once called the lion of the north; that naming of it became obsolete. They became a mere keeper of the north, and the old saying of the lion-like knights, who resisted the empire, existed no more.

The current Leonberg was merely a small country on the margins of the kingdom. Such a small country suddenly declared its succession from the empire and a return to its glorious past. And this occurred in a time when the Wyvern Knights of Dotrin were turning the eastern part of the empire into a barren, death-filled field.

Some said Leonberg's declaration was timely and made use of the confusing currents of the time, while others said that it was the raging of a goby, the angry response of a small sucker-fish.

The Kingdom of the Dead, which had fought so fiercely for nearly two-hundred years against a mighty empire, was no longer in the common memory of the people.

However, not everyone had forgotten the name of the old kingdom.

And one such man now found himself in the castle of an imperial noble, its halls blood-filled and scattered with the ravaged corpses of the vanquished.

"The Leonberg Kingdom has declared independence!" a Wyvern Knight gave him the full report after having flown in from the mainland. The king of Dotrin sat in the ruin of the castle as he ate raisins; he now jumped from his seat.

'Gulp~' he swallowed the raisins he had been chewing on and cried out, "The time has finally come!"

The king, small of stature, looked like a giant as he said this.

"But I am concerned that they are in too much of a hurry," the young Wyvern Knight

expressed his concern about Leonberg's impatience, saying that they should rather have focused on an internal political cleanup but instead have done so much more.

However, the king had a different idea.

"Jin Katrin, Jin Katrin! What did I emphasize to you?"

"After the heart of a nation is broken, even if they gather a hundred thousand soldiers, they cannot fight the empire," came Jin's reply, and he added, "The same holds true for Leonberg."

The king laughed generously and explained it to the young Wyvern Knight.

"They have been subordinates of the empire for a hundred years. Defeats and ill-events have overflown in their country through all that time, but now the Leonberger royal family have wiped out the cause of that atmosphere and established their independent kingdom in one fell swoop."

"But will they have the capability to withstand the empire if they don't really have the troops to fight the war?"

"If we prepare for ten years, could our might equal the empire's? If you prepare for a hundred years, can you overcome the empire? We of Dotrin fight like this because the empire and its troops are boiling in dragonfire."

The young Wyvern Knight could not give an answer to the king's questions.

"Obviously, wars are not won by the heart. Compared to strategies and tactics woven and employed with cold reason, the passion and resolve of knights does not exceed twenty percent of what is needed to win a war," the king said, tightening his grip on his lance, "But sometimes, that twenty percent dominates the remaining eighty percent."

The Wyvern Knight was still unconvinced. However, the king never unduly pushed or urged a promising knight.

"There is no need to try to understand now. You will see it countless times during this war, and you will come to know whether you hate it or not," the king said, and his expression changed as he looked back at the Wyvern Knights who were sitting around and taking a break.

“I ask you men: Are Dotrin’s knights unscrupulous fellows who pretend not to see the difficulties of their friends?”

“We are not like that!” the knights who had been watching the king from the beginning shouted with a bite to their voices.

“If so, do you remember the knight of another country who came to Dotrin in good faith and bled with us rather than leaving us alone in our fight?”

“Adrian Leonberger!”

“And does Adrian Leonberger deserve to be called Dotrin’s friend?”

“He is a great friend – a trusted comrade!”

‘Dwak!’ the king of Dotrin stamped his lance on the floor. The marble was smashed at once and debris scattered in all directions.

“If you truly think so, then what will you do now! Are you truly shameless people with only words but no action!”

The Wyvern Knights stood from their seats at once and began shouting with passion.

“Never!”

“Then what do you need to do now?” the king urged.

“To fight for Dotrin’s comrade! To reward his friendship!”

The king did not yell any more as he heard the Wyvern Knights’ answer.

“Ready your lances. Tighten the reigns on your wyverns.”

The Wyvern Knights thumped their lances on the ground in response.

“We head north!”

Upon the king’s declaration, the knights once more thumped their lances.

“For Dotrin’s allies!”

“A boon to the friendship of the young lion!”

Looking at the Wyvern Knights, the king cried, “The break is over! We head out right now!”

And a hundred wyverns flew.

* * *

“We had to merge them with the empire completely! If that was the case, we wouldn’t even be talking about it. They wouldn’t be independent, as they are now.”

“Come on, you know how stupid that sounds? In the past wise men gathered to discuss it, and they left Leonberg as they were, for they were merciful! If we tried to merge them with force, the northerners, born with the temperament of honey badgers, would often have risen up and caused rebellions.”

Talks of this topic never ceased in the halls of the imperial palace, where noble people gently discussed the future of Leonberg.

“You can march upon those cats who call themselves lions and press them back, repulse them, and defeat them directly! Our empire has the power!”

“If only that was the case! The hardships they faced with the monsters attacking them time after time has made them hard, I tell you!”

The fuss has arisen from the sudden declaration of independence by the Leonberg Kingdom.

“So what the hell should we do?!”

“Other than saying there is no point, you mean?!”

“So you’re going to leave those blasphemers who rebelled against the empire alone!”

“When did I say that! I just told you to be cautious because there is little benefit to be had by diverting our military!”

“And what about the plains on our eastern border which Dotrin is violating? And the mainland has been ruined by a monster we never even heard of! The entire world is

laughing at our empire! If we leave the Kingdom of Leonberg like this, no one will bow down before the empire's dignity anymore!"

"Ah! So what if we send an army and it fails? What are you going to do then? How do you know then that the entire continent will not rise against us if we suffer defeat!"

One one side of the argument were those who said the situation would spin out of control if the punishment of Leonberg ended in failure, this after the three invasions of Dotrin had also failed.

However, the vast majority of nobles were already angered by the rebellion of the small country, and so they advocated the sending of a large army of troops to behead the cheeky Leonberg Kingdom.

And at that time, the emperor's messenger arrived in the hall.

"His Majesty says: 'I cannot suffer the blasphemers. I will deploy all the troops in the northern territory and punish them!'"

And the intense debate ended with that message. Even the prudentialists, who had shouted at various nobles to show caution, did not express any disagreement. Dissenting with the emperor's decision was something that was not done in the empire.

Thus, twenty-seven legions and forty-two Imperial Knight Squadrons began to advance north toward Leonberg.

It was then that the Wyvern Knights of Dotrin, who have flown north, raided the supply trains and destroyed the vacated fortresses. It was natural that this action delayed the march of the imperial army. Some of the legion commanders, weak-willed men, were worried that their territories were now included under the assaults of the Wyvern Knights and turned their armies back. Still, there weren't many like them, and the main body of the imperial army continued to head north, albeit at a slow pace. Their motivation was all because of the emperor's dignified command that it had to be done.

The emperor wanted to punish Leonberg before Dotrin, so he issued an unconditional order for advance. The legion commanders who had circumvented the original command to return to their holdings had to turn their heads north again.

The Wyvern Knights now attacked the imperial army more heatedly.

However, as time passed and imperial legions began to unite into divisions of more than two legions, their activities were forced to lessen. No matter how courageous the airborne Wyvern Knights were, it was impossible for them to stem the advance of twenty-seven legions with just a hundred knights, even if their leader, the King of Dotrin, had transcended to a high place.

All they could do was kill the messengers that moved to and fro between each legion so that the imperial army could not move in a unified fashion.

Thanks to the knights' great efforts, the imperial army that moved was split into three, then five separate marching groups.

Six legions reached the border of Leonberg first, the first of which was the 17th Imperial Legion.

The Imperial 41st were guarding the border and was waiting for them.

"I am Degaulle de Devisch, senior knight of the 122nd Knights, belonging to the 41st Imperial Legion. It is a great honor to meet you, Legion Commander, for your name is famous!"

At the border, a thick-boned knight guided the imperial army, tired after their long march, to the fortress.

The commander of the fortress had been waiting for the arrival of imperial forces for many days, and he greeted them with great honor.

"You are much later than expected. Did you experience trouble on your way here?"

Numerous messages have been sent to the fortress, and yet the commander behaved as if he had not received any news. The legion commanders realized that the messengers had been waylaid by Dotrin's Wyvern Knights.

"It's all because of those damned Wyvern Knights of Dotrin."

"If it weren't for them, all twenty-seven legions would've gathered on the border from the first."

The commander grasped the rough situation and comforted the legion commanders who were grinding their teeth.

“No matter how many Dotrin’s Wyvern Knights may be and how lethal, they won’t be able to bother you in this place, so please relax during your stay.”

“Even if they can’t do anything here, I never got any proper sleep because of those damned flying Dotrinites.”

In actual fact, all the legion commanders looked exhausted.

As set out by the guidelines issued by the imperial family, they did not enjoy the natural benefits that they had held as legion commanders throughout the years.

Their helmets and armor, the official symbol of their stations, had to be put in chests and upon carts, while they themselves were mixed into the cavalry, dressed like regular knights. When they rested, they had to sleep in the same shabby tents as soldiers, not in the barracks of high-level commanders.

But there was no other way to it.

Some of the legion commanders had insisted upon their dignity, and so stood out, as they refused to march like the common soldier; they were killed by the Wyvern Knights. One of these unfortunate attacks took place when all the legion commanders gathered all the officers of the legion, and so the entire command structure of that force collapsed. After that, all the legion commanders gave up the benefits of their station and were even unable to convene any command meetings. For men who had enjoyed preferential treatment throughout their lives, it has been a painful experience.

Now, at least, it was over.

As the fortress commander had said, the Wyvern Knights would not be able to raid a fortress where seven legions were gathered. So, they gave their forces time to recuperate while they asked their host for information on the enemies across the border. Degaulle de Devisch, who has served as senior knight of the fortress for ten years, told them about Leonberg’s army.

“In my life, I have seen countless of these knights of the kingdom who bark like thousands of yipping dogs when faced with imperial knights but would howl like

brave wolves in front of their own allied knights and soldiers."

They are weak against the strong and strong against the weak: Degaulle poured forth severe critique against the weakness of the Leonberg army and its lack of discipline.

"These are men who will run away in fear if they see our allied forces march over the border. I bet you legion commanders will make them flee by striking a single telling blow."

The senior knight was exaggerating a bit, but he convinced them nonetheless. Those of Leonberg wouldn't run away at once, but the common belief was that they would at least surrender once they became frightened by the dignity and might of the imperial army.

"Hah! The Citadel of Gifted Lions. That's an undeserved name, just words they use to feel brave."

The 17th Legion Commander and the others had not originally been inclined to belittle their enemies, but when they heard all the officers of the fortress make such comments, they truly came to believe that the Leonberg army was weak. After all, the words of those who have been in contact with the kingdom's army through their long years of service in the fortress could be trusted.

When the 17th Legion Commander heard about the projected power of the Leonberg army, he conferred with the other legion commanders.

"His Majesty wants to punish those blasphemers as soon as possible."

So, they decided that, instead of waiting for the other legions, they would capture the enemy's fortress and strike the first major blow in the invasion.

In a kingdom full of rat-tailed men, how long can a single fortress hold out? How long can the enemy's resolve hold? The commander of the 17th said that if they destroyed a few border fortifications, then the war could end without a major investment of manpower, so the time for taking the initiative was now.

The other legion commanders agreed with his words. It was a foregone conclusion that a small country on the edges of the continent with nothing much going for it would collapse, and so it was necessary to move quickly, get what was needed from the conquest of the rat-tailed kingdom, and return in triumph.

And these commanders were now in the advantageous position, for they had arrived at the border before anyone else. So, they decided to use their already superior force to their advantage.

“We will stay here for four days more to unwind, and then we will attack the Gifted Lion Citadel.”

The commander of the fortress said that he supported their decision and that he would suborn to them knights and troops who knew the geography of the border territories and the circumstances in Leonberg.

The legion commanders weren’t very pleased with the fortress commander, but they accepted his offer nonetheless. They figured that if they had someone familiar with the local situation with them, they could place their banners upon the walls of the kingdom’s capital, and not merely upon those of some obscure border fortress.

And so they advanced upon the border fortress of the Leonberg kingdom with the aid of two companies of the 41st Legion and twenty knights who had been stationed in the fortress.

“The Gifted Lion Citadel will not hold out for even a few days.”

The high-ranking knights attached from the fortress constantly talked about the path of flowers that will unfold itself on the road ahead of the legion commanders.

The legion commanders appreciated such sweet feelings directed toward them and inadvertently imagined themselves erecting their banners atop Leonberg’s royal palace. Perhaps one of their numbers would be appointed governor if the newly-conquered Leonberg, instead of the ambassador Montpellier, who had not properly reigned in the kingdom.

As they began to think about it in that manner, the people and soldiers of Leonberg began to seem like the people they had to support. They were now willing to show them mercy, ignoring the mainland’s guidelines that Leonberg had to be thoroughly trampled underfoot.

And as they reached the fortress, the commander of the 17th Legion disregarded the warning of the knights and stepped forward. Indeed, it was as the senior knight had said: The army of Leonberg was weak. They were terrified upon seeing the large imperial army, having locked their gates firmly. Now and then, one of them would

stick their heads over the wall with wide eyes.

What sin have they committed? It is just that the lord of the land into which they were born, in which they grew up, has made the wrong decision, thought the commander of the 17th Legion.

“Poor soldiers of the Leonberg Kingdom! Your master has made the wrong choice, and His Majesty the Emperor has decided to decimate this land thoroughly! He said that we are to trample over you so that your foolishness will come to an end in the eyes of the heavens!” the legion commander cried out to the soldiers of the Gifted Lion Citadel in a gentle yet dignified voice.

“But know this! Not only is his Majesty a wrathful emperor, but also a merciful emperor! I have no doubt that his Majesty will welcome you with open arms if you truly repent and turn away from the blasphemous Leonbergers!” The legion commander was now drunk on his own words as he spoke of the emperor.

“Do what is right! Open the gates and greet us politely! Then you shall all live, and everything that you hold dear will remain in a state of perfection!”

No one in the citadel stood up and answered the commander’s pleas. Once more, the legion commander cleared his voice and advised them to surrender.

“Regardless of how easy or hard it may be to change flags, serving in the armed forces, following those who have made the wrong choices is a greater shame-“

‘Shhk!’

The commander had been talking for a while when a puncturing sound suddenly entered his ears.

‘Kwakud~’

And a strange sensation was felt in his heart.

“Uh?” the legion commander looked at his chest, and an arrow with bands of gold around its shaft was embedded in his chest.

“How can you, if I come to talk about peace…” the legion commander looked at the wall as he started retching blood – and he saw the old man standing upon the wall

with a large bow in his hand. The old man seemed somewhat too weak to be called a knight and far too noble to be called a mere nobleman.

Before realizing the archer's identity, the 17th Legion Commander's eyes rolled back into their sockets.

"Legion Commander, sir!" he heard someone shouting from beyond the screaming knights.

"…the King Of Leonberg!"

And then, he could hear no more.

CHAPTER 175
THE LAZY WOLF, THE SHEEP WAITING FOR TIME (2)

“Long live his Majesty the King!” the soldiers shouted into the king’s ears as he looked at the enemy-filled field.

“You still have the skill, your Majesty,” a quiet voice spoke in between the shouts. It was the voice of Count Schmilde Stuttgart, the commander of the palace knights.

“Don’t even speak such words,” came the king’s answer, without him turning his head.

The fact was that Lionel Leonberger had not aimed for the man’s heart, even if he did hit it. His shot did not kill the enemy immediately, and he knew he had fired with a stiff hand.

“Sire, you hit an enemy on the field over a hundred yards away, so how can words of praise not flow from my mouth? Even renowned archers can’t easily do it.”

“Not enough, not enough. If it were Margarita, she would’ve hit him between the eyebrows, not in the chest.”

“Isn’t the queen a famous archer in Balahard?”

The king laughed as he heard those words.

All of a sudden, the king recalled when he had first met her at a banquet thrown in his honor as Crown Prince.

Unlike other women, Margarita didn’t seem to be interested in the banquet, and Lionel was reluctantly attracted to her. He could see that even her dress had been foisted upon her with force, and the way in which her chest heaved reinforced her appearance of feeling awkward in such formal clothing. Her appearance was striking, and Lionel had asked that she would return to the royal palace.

When they met again, she had cut her hair short like a man's, and she was armed as a ranger and wore no fancy dress.

"I, Margarita Balahard, Second Company Commander of the Balahard Rangers, greets his Highness the Crown Prince."

She introduced herself as a Ranger Company Commander, not as a member of the Balahard family. It was an outright demonstration by her that marriage into the royal family was not welcomed. Margarita was a fresh shock to Lionel, who had only seen beautifully dressed young girls awaiting marriage up till then, and he completely fell for her. From that day on, Prince Lionel made all kinds of excuses to go visit Margarita in the north. It was never easy: Finding a justification for the Crown Prince to visit the north; and winning her heart, which was as cold as the harsh winters of the north.

Still, he persevered in his courtship and was finally able to obtain conditional permission from her.

"I have no intention of entrusting my life to a weak man. If you go beyond me in the art of archery, I may accept your heart. Until then, don't even think about seeing me again."

Prince Lionel hired an archery tutor on that very day.

His progress was slow due to his inherently low capability in the martial arts. Still, after three years of hard work, he was able to hit a target at fifty yards eight out of ten times.

He headed straight to the north, where he met Margarita again, now so grown that she was unable to hide her womanly charms. She led him straight to an empty courtyard without even greeting him after such a long time apart.

They had an archery contest there, and Lionel was able to hit the target with nine of the ten arrows, one more than his usual rate, and he figured that the brisk northern air must've aided him.

And Margarita got eight shots in total. Lionel won the bet and was eventually able to marry her.

It was only until later that he learned his wife did not have good skill at only fifty

yards, but rather a hundred. When he asked her why he had won, she had merely laughed instead of answering.

After Margarita's acceptance as Crown Princess, Lionel was happy, as if the world had been given to him. But in actual fact, he had nothing: The kingdom was already an imperial province, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Whenever he tried to do something to guide Leonberg's spirit in the right direction and escape the empire's boot, something unfortunate would occur. There were even those who entered the royal palace with daggers aiming at his throat and other agents who swung the imperial sword all over the kingdom.

Loyal men died trying to protect Lionel and Margarita, and then even the surviving loyalists started suffering bad luck in their families, causing one or two of them to fail at their duties. The vacancy left by these loyalists was occupied by those who were no less than lords of the empire.

Whenever Lionel remembered the corpses of those knights who gave their lives for their king and every time he recalls the families of those loyal to him fall one by one… Whenever he saw the permanent scars on the woman who he had sworn to cherish and protect like the most precious of flowers – each of those memories always shook him to the core. The time also came when Lionel had wanted to give up on his quest for an independent Leonberg, and it was the queen who raised him up during those times. Sometimes she cried out and chided him, and other times, she spoke as if to soothe her child. There were times when they held hands tightly and promised that they would see things through together.

Thanks to that, King Lionel was able to devote his entire life to Leonberg's independence without giving up. However, he only had one life and so few devoted loyalists remaining to him, so the path to independence would be long and hard. As time passed, his will was worn away, and at some point, he became used to being robbed and tolerated constant insults. He had thought that he had done his best, yet in the end, he knew that saying that was just a rationalization for his helplessness. After losing the secretly trained knights, his eldest son was forced to spend many years being resented. That was the most tragic time of all, and Lionel wished that he had only been a little firmer, a little more competent. If so, his son wouldn't have had to spend that time in vain. As King Lionel watched the empire's large army lining up beyond the walls, he knew he was not in a position where he could afford to be cursing his foolish and weak self.

I will never be that man again. I will remain faithful until the day that my life is over.

And what he had to do at this moment was to defend the kingdom from the enemy's vanguard.

Holding his bow firmly, King Lionel Leonberger stood on the wall and stared out at the enemy.

He saw that the man struck by his arrow was being carried away by knights who retreated to the rear. As the king studied the man's limp body, with his sagging hands, it was clear that he was dead.

"Their commander has been stained red!" the king shouted.

Knights and soldiers upon the wall began to shout as well.

"Death to the empire's dogs!"

"Let's smash the enemy!"

The imperial army began to withdraw, leaving the cries of the kingdom's army behind them.

* * *

After losing the legion commander to a dishonorable sniper, the imperial army withdrew, but theirs was only a temporary retreat. The commander of the 17th legion had served as the overall commander of the six legions; his vacancy was quickly filled by another legion commander. The army encamped on the plain overlooking the citadel, and they began preparing for a full-scale siege.

A great siege ram was constructed, as well as siege ladders and a tower that would house archers. However, the imperials couldn't even come to use the siege weapons that they had lugged here and constructed under heavy labor. Dawn came, and the soldiers on guard could no longer overcome their drowsiness as they nodded off.

Flames erupted on the edges of the Imperial Army's camp.

"They're here!"

One moment later, the guards announced the presence of the enemy.

The soldiers and knights were woken from their deep sleep and headed for the outskirts where the fires were raging, and all they could see were the remains of destroyed siege weapons and the hideous sight of corpses scattered about.

The enemies had already escaped.

The legion commanders swooped in and captured all the on-call knights who had failed to notice the night assault.

“A pa… paladin was leading the enemy,” a knight announced as he crawled on his knees, telling the commanders that they were given no choice.

However, the legion commanders’ expressions were only cold, for the commander of the 17th had been killed, and now even the siege engines were destroyed – all only after a day upon arriving at the battlefield.

It was a loss that the commanders could not have imagined, and they knew that they had to set an example to curb such weak discipline and skill. They decided that the throats of the fourteen knights who had been put in charge of guarding throughout the night had to be cut.

“I don’t understand this nervousness, as our foe is a weak country.”

“A lion does its best when it comes to catching a rabbit, but I believe this lapse has arisen because the great power gap between our respective armies made our men lax.”

“From now on, we should enforce discipline and force our soldiers to become engaged in this war with all seriousness that we can muster.”

The legion commanders immediately called a meeting.

“A rat will bite the cat if it is in trouble, and this is exactly the case. The fact that the enemies have done so much so soon means that we have them cornered,” Degaulle said, adding that the enemy lives in castles of straw and is desperate to avoid the flames. The legion commanders also firmly believed that the enemy’s further ploys would be in vain, as they were now on the alert.

“By the way, it looks as if the heavens are looking down upon us,” Degaulle said, and the commanders frowned at him, for they had suffered so much damage already. However, Degaulle did not raise a single eyebrow as he looked at the discomfited faces of the legion commanders. They continued talking.

“Anyway, their mad king does not know the subject of war. I can’t think how the nobles of this weak kingdom can follow the will of this king in sincerity.”

“Their main army must be small.”

“If you kill the king, then this war ends,” said Degaulle, “and the King of Leonberg is in that citadel.”

The faces of the commanders were hardened, that tension got released at once.

“Do you now see why I said that the heavens are smiling down upon us?” came Degaulle’s triumphant chatter. “Several legion commanders now have the chance of capturing the enemy’s monarch.”

The legion commanders were now in a hurry, for even now, the other imperial legions were heading to this citadel. If the citadel and king both were captured before the other commanders arrived, the reward would be given to those present.

Shortly before, they had worried about the discipline of the soldiers and the knights; now, they forgot all about the cutting of the fourteen knight’s throats to set an example.

But not everyone was blind to the truth. Malcoy de Marseille, commander of the 84th Legion, was the youngest present, yet remained within the higher echelons of command. He merely watched on as the other legion commanders spoke out so expressively as if they already held the head of King Leonberger in their hands.

“I have some arrangements to make within my legion,” said Malcoy, getting up and telling the others he had business to attend to as he left the meeting.

“Tchu, there goes someone who couldn’t properly serve his master, and yet he leads a legion. At times, I think his Majesty’s compassion is excessive.”

“The second princeps was the one his Majesty most cherished before his death, so he must have respected that old bond and allowed him to live.”

“Despite his Majesty’s mercy, it is just a shame that we share command with one so sloppy.”

“Well, he might have begged not to be become a commander on the margins, wishing to continue serving at Hwangdo. Otherwise, how do you explain his current lack of enthusiasm?”

“If that’s really the case, he’s a truly desperate person. A man who does not appreciate imperial grace after leaving a princeps to die in a ruined country, a man with nowhere to go.”

The legion commanders all disliked their younger counterpart, who was in his thirties and had once stood at the center of power.

But they soon forgot all about him as they returned to the topic of the citadel and once more started talking about the glories that will soon settle upon their shoulders.

* * *

“Marseille, why are you back already?” the lieutenant asked with wide eyes as he saw Malcoy appear early.

“A honey-tongued man is leading our legions into fire.”

“You are referring to that senior knight from the fortress.”

“That single knight has a tongue that is three times smoother than those of the nobles in Hwangdo, and the foolish commanders are not able to make use of their own minds whenever he talks.”

The lieutenant looked at his master with some embarrassment.

“This war will not end so easily,” Malcoy sighed.

“Contrary to the words of the senior knight, the Leonberg Army is not a pushover. Their stated demeanor is no different from those who have lowered themselves while waiting for the right time to strike – and the statement that they act very harshly only to the knights and soldiers of their own kingdom means that they try to maintain military discipline even if difficult times. It must be so.”

Believing this, Malcoy showed no hesitation in criticizing the high-ranking knight who regarded the enemy as nothing but a simple chore to be completed, as well as the legion commanders who have already defeated the enemy in their minds due to their foolishness.

“They have been sharpening their swords and biding their time, while the empire only rusted and rotted in the days of prolonged peace. If you cannot fix the rotten mentality of the commanders, things here will fare no better than they did in Dotrin.”

“If this is the problem, should Malcoy-nim not come to the fore and lead them?”

“No use. If I tell it to them, they won’t listen, and they won’t see the truth of my words until they experience it themselves.”

The lieutenant smiled bitterly at Malcoy’s lament.

This was because the lieutenant knew that Malcoy had been the only person who expressed concern to his superiors over the suspicious behavior of the Dotrin Army, who had all abandoned their forts at the same time during the First Dotrin Invasion.

However, the second princeps did not heed Malcoy’s warnings, and he ended up dying under a pile of stones. Then, the survivors said that it was all Malcoy’s fault for making such ominous predictions. In the end, he was stripped from his prestigious position as a central commander in Hwangdo and relegated to the command of a border legion.

“If you sense a trap and they don’t, it seems that the people in high command don’t know any better than these lesser commanders.”

“It’s clear as day, so let’s summon all our frontline officers.”

“What do you wish to do?” asked the lieutenant.

“Before the foolish legion commanders die in their game of power, at least we should try to save our legion.”

“Then, if we are lucky enough to have the other legion commanders killed, will you assume command?”

“I don’t want it. I don’t have the will for it. After his Highness the Second Princeps

died, all of his arrogance was transferred to his country. It's just enough for us to return home with our lives."

"It's a shame – to let your talents go to waste."

"Don't be cheeky, rather do what I ordered you to do."

The lieutenant left the barracks.

"Damn. If I have no luck, the responsibility of defeat will be thrust upon me again," the commander, alone now, sighed as if the world was ending.

CHAPTER 176
THE LAZY WOLF, THE SHEEP WAITING FOR TIME (3)

As Malcoy de Marseille had predicted, the imperial forces were struck badly.

There was no place without traps within two-hundred feet of the citadel, and it was clear how long the kingdom had been preparing for war. Heavy infantrymen fell into pits and were piercing upon spikes, and light infantrymen slipped down steep inclines as they fell into deep ditches. And as if these traps had not offered difficulty enough, flaming arrows soon fell among those who had managed to clear them.

Jars of oil, buried in advance, were ignited and swallowed the area in flames. Nevertheless, the legion commanders did not loosen their reigns and slow the attack. All sorts of traps were triggered by the bodies of men, and still, the imperial army launched its onslaught against the citadel.

And yet, the citadel showed no signs of imminent collapse.

After the sun set on the defeated soldiers, the roles were reversed.

Knights of the Kingdom of Leonberg, who had firmly defended the citadel, conducted raids upon the Imperial Army from time to time in the darkness. The imperials had to stay up all night, guarding against raids that could come at any time and from any place.

“This is it. I don’t know who is attacking and who is defending,” Malcoy lamented the poor defense of his allies and praised the strength of the enemy.

“In all the world, it is said that the skill of the imperial knights is superior to those of other countries. But now that I see it, the story on the ground is different,” said the young lieutenant, and Malcoy nodded.

It was a fair assessment, for the imperial knights, despite their numerical superiority, were not able to beat back the knights of the kingdom. Of course, a paladin of

Leonberg was skillfully leading the knights, but even taking that into account, the skill gap was too great.

The knights of the empire were cut down in battle whenever they met the knights of the kingdom.

Malcoy was unsure if it was due to the difference between those who wanted to keep their lands and survive and those who were justly blindly following their commanders. Or perhaps, it was because the elite knights serving the king were facing off against those lesser imperial knights suborned to the border legions.

All that was certain was that the citadel could only fall once the imperial knights could properly deal with the Leonberg knights.

“If we had wizards, the situation would be better.”

Unfortunately, the damage done to the wizards in the war against Dotrin was considerable. To compound matters, the Wyvern Knights had roved across the eastern and northern region, targeting the wizards first. The pool of imperial wizards was almost dry, and it would take time for the legion with proper magicians to reach the citadel.

However, no matter how Malcoy were to look at it, it didn’t seem as if the foolish legion commanders would be able to sustain the siege and preserve their troops until such a time.

“The Forty-Fourth Legion Commander was struck by an arrow!”

Malcoy frowned, for it seemed that the dumb commanders were now moving from the rear to the front. In their eyes, they were boosting the troops’ morale, yet in truth, they were damaging morale by dying.

“No great gain has been eked out.”

Malcoy no longer had the resolve to curse his idiotic allies, so he rather praised the enemy.

“It is nothing like what we were told. It was taken as certain that the King of Leonberg was incompetent and weak,” said the lieutenant, and Malcoy looked to the walls.

The enemy's king was always upon the wall, and he constantly fired arrows. Sometimes he even managed to snipe imperial knights and frontline officers, and the legion commander who had just now been struck by an arrow must have been a victim of the king's skill.

'Trumdum~ Trumdum~'

"Uh, there's the signal for retreat."

The drums of retreat sounded earlier than usual, and the imperial soldiers, who were clinging to the wall like ants, pulled back at once.

The forces of Leonberg never allowed for a smooth retreat.

'Schkp~ Schckp~' arrows struck into the backs of the retreating soldiers. Even if tragic, it wasn't as great a damage as the troops have suffered while assailing the walls all day long.

Corpses filled the fields, and all of those bodies were once imperial soldiers.

"I can't see the answer… the solution," and the battle ended as Malcoy lamented.

* * *

At that day's war council, other legion commanders brought forth strong charges against Malcoy and his 84th Legion. The other legions had attacked the walls without sparing their men, so these commanders were dissatisfied because only Malcoy and his legion were passively engaged in the siege.

At one point, he said that a reserve force was needed, but the situation did not play out as he intended, so he was forced to change his mind. Malcoy appealed to his fellow commanders, saying that he would do his best from tomorrow onward. However, on the next day and the day after that, Malcoy and his 84th passively shot arrows from the rear, or charged at the wall and then enacted a retreat. All he said was that he was not as capable as the commanders of the other legions, but he was trying his best, and he avoided the situation he most feared.

The sluggish siege continued.

Then, on one deep night, the imperial army was attacked. Unlike before, it was a

large scale raid done by a force of legion size. The commanders mounted a defense, but the Imperial Army had never suspected that the Leonberg Army would send so many troops from the citadel gates, and so they suffered tremendous damage.

When the legions had first arrived at the citadel, their troops reached 13,000; now, there were fewer than 7,000 battle-ready soldiers left, the dead and wounded excluded.

Except for the 84th Legion, which had suffered little over a hundred casualties, each other legion had lost more than half of its complement of troops. The truth was that in a mere few weeks of battle, the number of imperial troops had been halved.

It was impossible to capture a fortress with half the troops when it had been impossible to capture it with a full complement. In fact, it was clear that the Battle of Gifted Lion Citadel was a defeat for the Imperial Army. The legion commanders did not admit this, and so Malcoy played along and denied it as well.

These commanders still had their delusions, their mental images of capturing the king and claiming the enemy's capital. And so, even the wounded were dragooned into battle and forced toward the walls.

"He who retreats will die by my sword!"

"I promise great rewards to those who seize the walls!"

Commanders and knights threatened the staggering soldiers with swords to their backs, and as they drove the soldiers through the trenches, they promised them magnificent rewards.

The imperial army, supported by naught but threats from behind, climbed the walls, and the forces of Leonberg mowed them down as they made their ascent.

"That's it." As Malcoy saw the citadel stand strong against the blind assault, he quietly pulled back the 84th Legion. Legion commanders came to him and started hurling curses.

"A coward! A coward!"

"You useless dog that couldn't even protect your owner!"

As such insults and the angered gazes of the commanders were directed at him, Malcoy spoke.

“If you have power in your arms, then draw your swords, climb the wall, and aid your soldiers.”

The commanders were angered by this response and started pointing at Malcoy; then, they looked around themselves. The troops of the 84th were staring at them, and the legion had preserved its power. Only as the commanders were faced by that terrible presence did they realize that the 84th Legion was the strongest imperial force on the battlefield.

“Do not!” Malcoy suddenly shouted.

“If you keep them alive, they will testify against you, Malcoy-nim.”

“Don’t do it.”

“Sir, you seem to have forgotten why you were exiled to the border.”

“I won’t say it again. Sheathe your sword.”

The legion commanders had pale complexions as they listened to the conversation between Malcoy and his lieutenant. They had realized that the officers of the 84th Legion were trying to shut their mouths by killing them.

“Well, do as you like, sir. I just follow orders, and I don’t care if I get sent off to some remote area again.” The lieutenant beckoned and sheathed his sword, which had suddenly popped into his hand. The soldiers of the 84th surrounding the legion commanders fell back.

The commanders were bereft of their senses as they fled, almost running.

“Aren’t you bothered that these greedy ones have sent thousands into the fire, and yet they remain alive?” the lieutenant coldly asked as he looked at the fleeing commanders, and he added, “Malcoy-nim, you are keen on sparing them. Still, I follow orders, even if I am a little angry today. Those pigs that live should be roasted, yet it is only innocent soldiers who have burned.”

“We are on a battlefield. There is no such thing as innocence,” Malcoy stated.

“Even though they are just following orders?”

“Fight and win, plunder, and claim women. Soldiers are part of war, and the rationalization that they are good and only do bad things due to being powerless, due to following orders… such reasoning is disgusting,” came Malcoy’s response.

“Ah, I forgot how much Malcoy-nim hates war,” said the lieutenant in mock-revelation.

“Look out there, at all that death. I can’t put up with it anymore, no matter how much you are willing to.”

“Yeah, and is that an order?” asked the lieutenant, who then bowed his head in an exaggerated manner and stepped back.

Malcoy watched as the kingdom’s soldiers and the imperial troops, who were clinging to the walls of the citadel, slaughtered and slaughtered each other.

“Fuck.”

Malcoy was sick of it.

The night was deep, yet the legion commanders did not withdraw their troops. The sound of spears and swords clashing echoed in the dark, and screams and shouts continued to flow from the walls.

And the day dawned bright.

The soldiers of the empire who had gained the wall were surrounded by the knights of Leonberg and fell, one or two at a time. It was the moment when the vain dreams of the legion commanders were shattered.

And at that time, a group of men came riding in from the rear. Their clothing was the type typically worn by imperial cavalry, and the legion commanders rejoiced at their coming.

“It looks like another legion has finally arrived nearby!”

No greedy men were left who wished to claim king and citadel both; now there were only defeated soldiers who waited for salvation.

The cavalry approached at a brisk pace, yet their condition did not seem the least intimidating. It seemed as if they had come out of a battle, for their armor was full of dents and scratches, and their eyes were nervous.

The cavalry rode up while the legion commanders watched them with firm faces, and they exclaimed, “The Thirty-Fourth Legion, Eighteenth Legion, and Hundred-and-Second Legion have been defeated on their march by the joint efforts of Dotrin’s Wyvern Knights and Leonberg’s army!”

“What!”

The cavalry looked at the fear-filled legion commanders and informed them of the situation in the rear with exhausted faces.

“The enemy’s force was about the size of two legions, and their knight squadrons alone were about ten.”

“Where did they come from?”

“The details are unknown, but the banner of the crouching golden lion was among the banners that they raised.” The cavalryman paused for a moment and then spoke again. “Their commander is believed to be of the direct lineage of the Leonberger royal family.”

The legion commanders still couldn’t figure out the situation and rolled their eyes as they discussed it when Malcoy interrupted. “The attack on the citadel has failed.”

“Are you an ally or an enemy?!” one of the newly-appointed legion commanders shouted, forgetting what had just happened a short while ago.

However, before the man could unleash all his anger, a horn was blown from the direction of the citadel, and it was a signal unique to the Royal Leonberg Army. At the same time, the citadel’s gate opened, and the knights and cavalry of the kingdom poured out.

“They still have energy left after fighting all night?” Malcoy exclaimed and then whistled through his teeth.

“Go! Everyone will retire to the fortress of the Forty-First Legion!”

“We can reorganize our troops there and make another attempt!”

Malcoy laughed at the legion commanders who were calling a retreat even as their death was approaching.

“You can’t flee to the fortress,” Malcoy said as he pointed toward the citadel.

Knights with white-blazing swords in golden armor were galloping at a frantic speed.

‘Chok~’ as the legion commanders stared at them, they heard a dull noise and turned their heads in amazement.

“What are you doing now?” one of the legion commanders asked. Instead of answering, Malcoy gave orders to his lieutenant.

“Let them abandon their swords and wait as they are.”

“Eighty-Fourth Legion! Drop your swords! Stand fast!” came the lieutenant’s loud shout. The soldiers and knights of the 84th unsheathed their swords and laid them down on the ground.

“I asked what you are doing now, y-Urgh!” before the legion commander could finish speaking, an uncomfortable noise escaped from his lips, and he slumped to the ground, his neck broken.

That was the beginning, as the knights of the 84th Legion started bashing in the heads and breaking the necks of the legion commanders and their men.

‘Krck~ Krck~’ knights had snuck up behind the cavalry and swiftly pulled them from their horses, twisting their necks.

“If we are to surrender anyway, I think it is better if we offer a gift. Am I wrong?” the lieutenant, who had just then snapped the neck of a cavalryman, asked with a shrug as Malcoy looked at him.

Malcoy, a man of natural virtue, shook his head.

And in that instant, the knights and cavalry of the kingdom came charging up.

“Surrender! Unconditional surrender!” Malcoy shouted as he raised both his hands.

* * *

The king was very tired. His entire body was marred with small wounds, and the fingers that had operated his bow were blistered. During the night’s battle, he had stowed his bow and sheathed his sword, heading deep into the citadel so that he could heal his body. But even then, the king’s eyes were shining brighter than ever.

“You say that they surrendered without fighting?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The king tilted his head as he heard the palace knight’s report.

“I know well that the single remaining enemy legion has preserved their power almost completely. Am I wrong?”

“Your Majesty’s knowledge is not in error.”

“But why?” asked the king, and the palace knight said that a detailed explanation was in the coming, for the troops that had charged out were returning.

“Sire, I, Count Schmilde Stuttgart, have returned after completing my mission.”

“And every enemy surrendered?”

“If they had fled, at least half would have survived and reached the fortress. Somehow, they all waited for us and surrendered, but I have no grasp of the imperial language.”

The king frowned as he listened to Nogisa’s report.

“Aren’t they trying to take the citadel by faking their surrender?”

“They offered us dozens of imperial corpses as they revealed their willingness to surrender, and all the corpses were those of legion commanders and high-ranking officers.”

“So you are sure it is not a false surrender?”

“I saw the truth of it in their commander’s eyes.”

The king rose from his seat and said, “I have to meet him.”

Nogisa motioned for him to wait.

“Sire, a Wyvern Knight came and gave me news from the imperial front.”

The king stopped walking as he looked back at Nogisa, who continued his report.

“It is said that the allied legions of the north and center, led by his Highness the Crown Prince, have so far successfully defeated three enemy legions by cooperating with the Wyvern Knights. It is said that they are marching south to avoid the enemy’s advanced lines and that they will raid the Ninety-Second Imperial Legion, which has been separated from the others.”

The old knight looked at the king and added, “The damage to our forces is minor, and the Crown Prince is safe and uninjured.”

“The Wyvern Knight hasn’t left yet?” came the king’s question.

“I held him back for a while, in case your Majesty had a message to send with him.”

“Rather than being overly greedy, let him tell my son to be content in fulfilling his intended purpose,” said the king as he avoided Nogisa’s gaze. Even though he turned his head, the king could not hide his blushing cheeks and ears from the old knight.

Nogisa merely smiled in silence.

* * *

“Will they be okay in the Gifted Lion Citadel?” I suddenly muttered as I looked to the northern horizon.

Arwen heard me and answered, “The best knights in the kingdom, including Count Stuttgart and the Knights of the Palace, are guarding the citadel. They are supported by the heavy infantry of the central region and the troops of the Southern Legion, who are not lesser soldiers when compared to the Balahard Rangers. Even if the imperial legions flock in, it would not be easy for them to penetrate those walls.”

Arwen sighed, adding, “Half of the royal family’s forces are guarding the Gifted Lion Citadel, so please stop worrying.”

“Who said I was? I’m just talking to myself.”

“And I am telling you that you have spoken to yourself more than thirty times,” Arwen murmured, and as she did, I heard a sharp cry.

I looked to the sky and saw a wyvern hovering above us. The rider eagerly gestured with his hands. However, he was far away, so it was hard to see what he was saying. I gave mana to my eyes and stared at him, yet could still not understand. In the next instant, someone tapped on my shoulder: It was Gunn.

(Distance Half Day. Enemy Discovered)

Gunn checked the sign language of the Wyvern Knight with her bright eyes and gestured as he gestured, informing me of the message.

(One Legion. Matches Target)

After Gunn’s report, I looked back at my army.

“All forces, march out!”

Upon my order, the troops from the central and northern regions began to move in unison.

‘Kyaah ahhh!’ the wyvern cried sharply and flew off, disappearing south.

Gunn then spoke the final message that the Wyvern Knight had left behind.

“They won the first siege.”

“What?”

(King Participated)

I was caught off guard by that report.

“That man really wants to cut deep into them,” I muttered.

CHAPTER 177
THE WAR OF THE WEAK (1)

We soundlessly moved along the valley of hills for a long time, our force like a thick spider stretching its legs as it marched. Rangers who had fallen away from the main unit returned and reported that there was an imperial camp beyond a series of nearby ridges.

“I haven’t heard reports of other legions yet, and their vigilance is not very tight.”

As the ranger platoon leader gave his report, I raised my hand.

“We will stop here for a moment.”

Arwen nodded and quietly rode her horse to the back of the ranks.

“All forces, halt.”

“All stop.”

“Get your perimeter in place.”

Her instructions were transmitted to the soldiers by the commanders of each unit, and there was a stir for a moment before the men stopped talking. Since everyone knew that we still had the element of surprise in our position, the disturbance along the ranks was not great. Thousands of sweaty riders upon their horses were awaiting my orders. I wanted to head to the battlefield right there and then, but horses and riders both needed a break.

“Short break.”

The commanders were repeating my orders in soft voices.

“All rest.”

“Each one rests on his own time.”

“I’m gonna dismount.”

The riders got off their horses and rested in their own way.

“Oh, I’m dying here!”

“I’m pretending to be a cavalryman. I’ve never signed up for this. I’ll die.”

Rangers casually laid themselves on the ground and soon started snoring.

“Each one rests in a comfortable position.”

“Report if your horse has a condition.”

The soldiers of the central region were not as lazy as the rangers, but likewise, they relieved their fatigue by sinking to the ground.

“Wow, whoa girl. Goood.”

“Be patient, just a bit more.”

The knights stood upright as they took care of their horses and checked their gear. It wasn’t that there were no signs of fatigue among them; rather, their fighting spirit won out over their exhaustion.

Everyone was doing better than I thought. Honestly, because the rangers do not know horses much, I didn’t expect them to follow the knights and soldiers of the center so well.

I looked at them for a long time with a bold heart when I suddenly felt a strange wave of energy.

I turned my head in the direction of the wave’s origin, and in front of me, the sky was dark yet bright above the ridge.

‘Rggmmbl~’ one second later, the faint sound of thunder came.

‘Shhk~’ the rangers who were snoring while lying flat now arose, and the soldiers of the center who were massaging their bodies to relieve their fatigue stopped doing so at once. The knights who were checking their horses and equipment now stared at

the flashing sky.

“It looks like it started,” Arwen came and told me as she returned from the rear.

I looked up again and studied the night sky over the ridge. Night and day frequently intersected in that sky. It was a wondrous sight for those who looked on from afar, but a terrible disaster for the imperial army in the heart of that storm.

It was a magical light, and its cause was a pair of warlocks bombarding the ground, being flown about by Wyvern Knights.

“If I was hit by lightning in the middle of sleeping, my mind would not be in a happy place,” said Bernardo Eli, expressing casual condolences for the imperial troops upon who the warlocks were unleashing such a nightmare, troops who were tired and sleeping after a long day’s march.

“We must move again soon,” I said, and it seemed that the commanders had been awaiting this order, for they started to rush their soldiers.

“Ready to go! Why are you guys still sitting on the ground?”

“Hurry! I don’t want to kill only the dregs left by the Wyvern Knights!”

The ranks bustled and quickly formed themselves up.

“Count Brandenburg.”

“Yes, your Highness?”

The lord from the central region knelt before me, having awaited my order.

“Take the Iron Hawks and the Balahard Rangers up the hill. When the signal goes off, pour arrows down upon the camp.”

“I will prepare the advance without a hitch.”

Count Brandenburg led the Iron Hawks and the rangers away from the main unit.

“Erhim Kiringer.”

“Your Highness.”

“Lead the Templars and the heavy infantry and wait on that side of the hill.”

One hundred Templars and the mounted heavy infantry rode toward the hill.

“Arwen. Lead the regulars to the opposite side of the hill.

“According to your Highness’s will!”

Arwen looked up, buckled her sword to her chest, and left the main unit with the light infantry.

“Eli. Lead the Dusk, Dawn, Twilight, and Silver Fox Knights to the flank.”

Bernardo Eli disappeared with the knights, Gwain’s troupe going with him.

The only forces remaining were the cavalry, Black Lancers, and Winter Knights.

“We hit them head-on as soon as the warlocks’ magical bombing ends.”

“Yes, your Highness!”

“Go.”

The one-eyed cavalry commander and knights answered fiercely and kicked into their horses’ flanks.

I led them up the hill, and the Imperial Army encampment became visible.

‘Dwak! Krwak!’ the faint sound of thunder now became much louder.

“Wow! Woah, good,” I calmed down my horse, which was about to run wild as it became excited by the shock waves that shook the earth. We rode on for a long time, and finally, we reached the top of the hill that directly overlooked the battlefield.

“It’s a living hell.”

Flames were spreading at a rapid pace as they consumed tents, and soldiers were running around as the fires raged all over the place. The troops who yet maintained

discipline were trying hard to extinguish the flames, but the inferno was too great. Most of the imperial troops scattered left and right, chased by fire.

A nasty smell poked at my nostrils, and the screams of soldiers wreathed in flame broke into my ears.

With one hand on the hilt of my sword, I waited quietly.

'Rrmmbl~ Kdshwa~' the thunder that had been bursting from the sky without ceasing now subsided, bit by bit.

"Prepare," I said as I raised my hand and lowered my visor, 'Cheolkup~'

The open view was now obscured, and all noise dulled. The narrow slit that was now my sight existed in shades, and the world beyond was red.

"Woo!" excitement and tension began to fill my body at the prospect of an impending battle.

I struggled to suppress my thumping heart and held my breath. My elevated fighting spirit and warm breath filled my helmet in no time, and I wanted to release that heat right away.

But I bided my time, trying to suppress my excitement. Then the thunder ceased completely, and the glare upon the night sky was seen no more – and the time finally came.

'Goo-oh-oh-oh!' a great energy rose from the direction in which there had been flashing lightning and rumbling thunder, and so strong was that presence that it felt as if my body was sizzling.

It was a sure sign the violent King of the Sky, of Dotrin, would soon descend upon the earth.

"Fwoo," I took a deep breath – and before the Knights of the Sky attacked first before the monster of the Dotrin royal family devoured all the imperial forces – I exhaled that deep breath.

"Charge!"

My body was filled with boiling heat, and inwardly, I constantly shouted [Poetry of War].

‘Silent are the snowy peaks and the blood-drenched walls’

‘Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!’

* * *

‘Kdwa~ Kdwa~’

“Help- Save me…”

Remion, a light infantryman of the 92nd Imperial Legion, quietly awakened to a faint noise he heard in the hazy night.

‘Kwrkwa!’ that’s when he heard a great cracking sound.

“What, what!” Surprised, Remion instinctively ran out of the tent, and in the next instant, something struck the barracks he had fled from in terror mere seconds ago.

‘Kwrak!’ and with that terrifying roar, the barracks collapsed.

‘Hwafruch!’ flames soared, and those soldiers who had remained in the tent now stumbled out, aflame.

“Arrghhh!”

“Help! Stop it!”

Remion stared blankly, and he had no time to even think about saving his comrades.

“This- What is this?”

A sea of fire raged everywhere; it was as if the entire camp had become infernal.

As Remion watched blankly on, something again struck from the sky.

‘Kwrakwa!’

Flames spread, and soldiers screamed their throats hoarse for help. They died in their droves. Remion turned his head and saw people who were charred into coals. Just a while ago, they had been the comrades who had laughed and chatted with him in the same tent.

There was no sorrow in Remion; he didn't even understand what was happening. Having fallen onto the ground, he now stood up and stared at the flames.

'Klang Klang Klang!' the bell announcing the enemy sounded one moment later.

"It's the enemy!" soldiers and knights ran out of their barracks and screamed.

"Draw your swords! Prepare for enemy attack!"

"Douse the fires first!" the commanders ordered.

It was then that Remion's mind flashed as he drew his sword and started marching.

"Put out the fire first, soldier! You want the entire camp to burn down!" a commander shouted at him.

Remion could not decide whether he should ready his sword and prepare to fight or whether he should extinguish the fires first. He couldn't do this; he couldn't do that; so he just ran back and forth.

Other soldiers were also milling to and fro as they struggled to follow conflicting orders.

"Don't be mindless! Leave the camp at once!" a knight in fancy armor screamed his order at Remion.

"Bah! I don't know the direction because of the fires!" pleaded the infantryman.

"Ah, you fool! Follow!" The knight turned around, and Remion ran with him.

"Follow me!"

As the knight ran on, he took other confused soldiers under his command. At first, there was Remion alone; soon, there were dozens of them running after the knight.

“What the hell is going on!”

“It’s not us! Must be the Royal Dotrin Army!”

“Fuck them!”

The soldiers were loudly discussing events as they clumped together. After so many soldiers who had faced the same situation gathered and formed rank to some extent, Remion’s confusion started to clear up.

He looked at the knight before him, and in the chaotic situation, the appearance of the knight firmly leading them was a reliable assurance.

If Remion followed the knight, he could survive. He thought so, so he followed him all the more desperately so that he did not fall behind by any chance. It was pointless.

‘Bwak!’ Remion heard a great noise, and he felt his body fly through the air.

“Uh…” When the darkness fled from his mind, he found himself sprawled on the ground, and he heard no sounds, for the explosion had burst an eardrum. It was better, for Remion no longer heard the thunder and the screams, and his head was less dizzy. He stood up, but it wasn’t easy – his sense of balance was a mess.

Still, he somehow got up.

“Ah,” Remion barely managed to check his surroundings, and the sight devastated him. The iron-armored knight was twitching on the ground, and Remion snapped awake as he ran to him.

“Knight!” Remion hurriedly grabbed the man’s helmet.

‘Shkk~’ the helmet scorched his fingertips, and the smell of roasting flesh assailed his nose, but Remion was desperate to have a knight who would guide him out of this hell.

“Knight! Be patient!”

After Remion struggled for time to try and loosen the buckling of the armor, which he did not know how to do, he managed to remove the knight’s helmet slightly.

“Ugh!” There was only a bloody lump of flesh inside the helm, and suddenly, the knight’s seizure-like twitching stopped.

‘Kwash~’ Remion fell onto his buttocks and scrambled backward from the corpse.

“Ouch!” and as he did, the pain from his scorched palm hit him hard, and he screamed and screamed. As he did, the situation of his surroundings caught his eye. The soldiers with poorer armor than iron-armored knights were sprawled across the ground, their limbs twisted or torn off.

“This is a nightmare!”

Terrified, Remion continued to kick at the ground as he crawled back when suddenly, something caught his ankle. He turned his head, and his neck creaked.

“Uha! Save me… please.”

Remion looked into a horrible face, half-melted by the heat, with the flesh spilling and flowing from it.

“Hey, hak! Let go!” and without much resistance, the soldier’s hand stopped grasping Remion.

He staggered upright and started running, wishing to find a place with less heat. Under instinct, he ran and ran. Eventually, Remion reached the outskirts of the camp, where the tents had not been swept away in the inferno.

“I survived…”

Before Remion could even start cheering and shouting, the sound of horses’ hooves began shaking the earth.

“Ah.” Remion blankly looked at the distant hill, and cavalrymen were charging down it.

They certainly weren’t allies: The emblem of a crouching lion was woven into the banner at the head of the cavalry, an emblem of the enemy.

‘Dukudu~ Dukuduku~’

The cavalry charged down the hill and spread their line wide, and Remion looked around after seeing their tumultuous charge. There was nowhere for him to escape to, so he clutched his sword in his scorched hand.

“I didn’t come here to die, not in a place like this!”

He believed that maybe they would be able to win this battle and take over the lands of the small kingdom, that they might finally become a victorious army. Remion thought that he might get lucky and claim plunder.

“I am not dying. I will never die!”

He gripped his sword tightly as he caught a glimpse of the enemy charging on.

‘Dumdumtum~ Dumtumtum~’

And at that time, the imperial marching drums sounded out.

“Move!”

Remion reflexively moved aside as countless troops poured out of the camp. Although they were scorched and battered, they were most certainly proud knights of the empire.

“Longspearmen! To the front!”

The longspearmen who passed Remion by fixed the bases of their three-meter long pikes into the ground and all the pike heads were aimed squarely at the enemies coming down from the hill.

Remion started laughing as he remembered the hell he had just gone through.

“Is it over now?” Now that he truly knew he was alive, Remion sighed in relief. He didn’t doubt that the imperial spearmen and knights would crush less than a handful of cavalry.

His belief did not last long.

‘Peee eee pswha!’ and an arrow flew from the hill, crying with a sharp sound.

‘Buwooo wuwooo!’ the sound of a horn rang one instant later.

‘Swassassasak~’ and at that moment, a hail of arrows poured down into the spearmen.

“Aahhh!” the longspearmen screamed as many of their numbers fell, and it was at that moment that the spearhead of cavalry reached the bottom of the hill. There were no screams, nor the sound of horses crashing into pikes.

‘Schhkk!’

All Remion heard was the sound of something being severed – just that.

‘Dlup~ Dlup~’ the massed spearmen became headless corpses, and the pikes they had firmly held were already shattered as they clattered to the ground.

“The kingdom’s paladins!” the imperial knights lined up behind the spearmen shouted. And beyond their ranks, brilliant flashes of gold and blue erupted like dawn.

That was the last thing that Remion saw.

The infantryman, who had once dreamed of success, died where he stood, his entire body pierced in the rain of arrows that poured from the sky.

CHAPTER 178
THE WAR OF THE WEAK (2)

Leonberg's paladins broke through the spear wall and jumped from their horses – and then they began running wild.

"Noo!" soldiers screamed, and severed heads flew into the air.

"Block them! Stop the paladins first!"

"Senior knights, charge the paladins! The rest, block the other knights!"

Imperial knights came to the fore, trying to prevent the collapse of the line, but their efforts were not enough. The kingdom's paladins were crushing the imperial knights with overwhelming power. The distinction between double-chain and triple-chain was meaningless, for none could stop the swords of the paladins; in this, they were equals.

The Imperial Knight Commander then stepped forward.

"These guys!" the commander yelled as he summoned mana and let it flow over his sword. Even if he hadn't crossed the wall himself, he believed he would be able to confront a paladin for a while, as he was determined not to die. His illusion was absolute, as his sword was sliced in half, and in the next attack, a long gash was cut into his chest.

"Oh, no matter if you are a paladin, how far is-" the commander expressed amazement, not even thinking of his wound, and these words became his last.

'Schlk!' the paladin's sword sliced through the commander's neck.

'Tuk, degurdegur~' a head with an expression of amazement rolled over the ground.

The senior knights who had gathered around their leader continued to watch as he lost his head.

“We need to get out of this place!”

“Join the other legions and plan the future from there!”

The high-ranking knights stepped back and shouted, then started running away.

“Woah! Retreat!”

“Retreat!”

The knights scattered all over the place, and the spearmen who had been desperately maintaining their lines as Leonberg’s knights trampled over them now threw down their weapons and began to flee.

But there was nowhere to escape to – the kingdom’s knights were in front, and the great wall of fire was blocking the rear. The imperial army was caught between flames and knights and had nowhere to go. The knights of the kingdom annihilated them.

Similar scenes were taking place all over the camp.

“The actual damage to our troops is not great! First, douse the flames! Then the way will be opened!” the commander of the 92nd Legion shouted, desperate to calm the chaos that has reached such an extreme pitch.

And through some effort, the soldiers who were wandering around began to extinguish the flames and soon started centering themselves around their legion commander, who had barely settled his mind when the news came.

“The enemy cavalry is charging to this spot!”

The messenger’s face was pale as he gave his report, and the commander asked with a scream, “The knights! What are they doing!”

“Our allied knights are annihilated!”

“What!” the legion commander shouted, his mouth agape.

Something was now seen approaching from beyond those flames that had not yet been doused. Despite being some distance off, the legion commander’s heart was

crushed as a huge presence slammed into him.

‘Qwshaa~’ the stiffened legion commander saw the sea of flames split apart some distance off, and each time it did, a blue flash soared high into the sky.

“Woah! The paladins of the kingdom are coming!” the messenger shouted.

“Come on, get out of here!” the officers and escort knights shouted as they started pulling their commander back, but there was no time for escape.

‘Qashaaah!’ as if it was a typhoon, a wind suddenly struck, and the fire was caught in it and roared once more.

“Augh! My arm! My arm!”

“Help me!”

The soldiers who had been dousing the fire were now consumed in flames, and they screamed. Tents were torn down and swept away by the strong wind, which crashed into the soldiers. In an instant, the area had become a mess.

‘Shoo!’ and at that moment, disaster struck from the heavens.

‘Bwang!’

Under that sudden shock, the legion commander lost his mind for a moment.

When he snapped awake, the wall of fire that had run wild was gone, as if it was never there. All that remained were scorched barracks that had collapsed entirely into the ashes.

The legion commander stared at the scene and trembled at the absolute nature of the sudden change.

‘Kreeeh!’ came a painful sound, like the scratching of iron, and the commander felt a damp breath licking his back. He forced his stiff neck to creak as he looked behind him. Up until then, there had only been a burning tent, the place where the knights and officers escorting the legion commander used to gather; now, there was a giant wyvern standing right behind the commander with shreds of meat in its claws.

‘Kreuuak~’ the wyvern growled.

‘Hwraak!’ and the moment that the rancid, moist breath of the beast slammed into the legion commander’s face, and he collapsed.

“Are you the legion commander?”

It was only when the commander heard this heavy voice that he became aware of a rider who sat on the back of the wyvern.

“I asked if you are the legion commander,” the stuffy voice came from a helm that covered the man’s entire face, and it was far too dignified a voice to belong to a knight.

The legion commander nodded out of instinct.

“I won again this time,” the wyvern rider mumbled quietly.

‘Swaa!’ the commander heard a sharp noise.

‘Slchup!’ and at that moment, he felt a burning pain spread across his back. When he lowered his head, he saw a sword blade protruding from his chest.

‘Ugh~’ a groan escaped the imperial’s lips a moment later. His entire body was drained of strength, and with the last of his energy, he turned his head. A knight in golden armor stood before him, and the world started flashing white and then black. In the midst of that dark world, only the symbol of a lion engraved upon the knight’s chest remained as an afterimage in the imperial’s mind.

The legion commander closed his eyes, and they never opened again.

* * *

The King of Dotrin frowned.

“Isn’t this a little stupid, now that the battle is over?” he asked.

Leonberg’s prince did not care, despite the tone of displeasure in the king’s voice. The prince recovered the sword that had pierced into the commander’s back and gave his response.

“It doesn’t matter who put the sword through in the end. What matters is who discovered him first.”

“It’s rude to put your spoon into another man’s soup,” said the king.

“Honestly, Dotrin just heated the pot. Isn’t it clear that we stirred the stew and cooked the real deal?”

“If the warlocks had not rained down fire, things would not have gone so easily.”

“Would the results have been different if you had not lit a fire? And besides, cold soup is easier to sip than soup recently heated,” said the prince, and I got in the next words, “Anyway, the head of the Ninety-Second Legion commander belongs to our kingdom.”

“What is this? I forced myself to get here today, and now you doubt my talent?” the king of Dotrin clucked his tongue and shook his head.

Luckily, some imperial officers had survived the attack of the wyverns who were watching. All were trembling in fear and contempt, yet none dared step up and insert themselves into the conversation between the two men.

Their camp was burned, and their legion devastated; the knights who had gone to defend the outskirts of the camp were annihilated, and all the heads of the legion, including its commander, were now dead.

They had decided that there was no benefit to be had in fighting, and so all the surviving knights and officers had thrown down their swords as one.

“They have surrendered.”

The two men looked at the imperials and then back at each other. Both then opened their mouths at the same time:

“Whoever wants to – face me!” cried the king.

“Raise your swords again! I give you this chance to fight with honor to the end,” urged the prince.

* * *

The words flowed from the king and me almost simultaneously, and our intended meanings were similar.

I glanced at the King of Dotrin. His helm-covered face was not visible, but I understood well enough that his fervor had not cooled down yet. The same was true of me.

“I do not accept your surrender,” I said, and the imperial officers cowered as they gave answer to my words.

“Oah! Our legion has lost all ability to resist. We surrender so that unnecessary sacrifices are prevented between us.”

His blatant answer was so utterly mediocre.

“The empire started this war,” I stated flatly.

“It doesn’t matter who started it. You have competed on the battlefield, and you have won. Even though I was defeated, I hope you will honor me as a captain.”

I laughed and asked them, “So, because you have admitted defeat, you now ask that I save your lives?”

Was my expression too explicit of a threat? The imperial officers had been talking kindly; they now offered more concrete pleas.

“In the future, my family will pay a reasonable ransom for my release.”

It was a great spectacle, and I listened to their answers for a while.

It wasn’t as if they were grasping at straws at the last moment; the imperial officers truly believed that their offers would prove enough. They certainly believed that we would spare their lives.

“If my guess is correct, you must be the prince of the Leonberg Kingdom. If you know of chivalry and nobility, you must recall the promise and duties of those with blue blood.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“If you are the victor but your opponent surrenders, you must ensure his unconditional safety – only if he is a knight or noble, of course. This is so that those of noble blood are not wiped out, and this is the implicit promise between all noble families on the continent.”

I acted the fool, agreeing with the words of the imperial officers who made such loud noises.

Eventually, I burst into laughter.

One does not kid in war, and it was so ridiculous that these dogs who had run off to trample over other people’s lands were now trying to save their lives by telling me they would line my palms with gold once times became more advantageous. I sniggered and laughed, and then I asked the King of Dotrin, “What do you think?”

“Oh, their meaning of war and war as I know it is vastly different,” said the king sitting astride his wyvern as he looked down upon the officers of the empire. “In our Dotrin, the loser always follows the victor’s treatment, even if it proves to be a miserable death.”

“That’s so unfortunate,” I said as I nodded in an exaggerated fashion as if I had just heard something profound, “because that’s the law of Leonberg as well.”

When I shifted my gaze to look at the imperial knights, it was a ridiculous sight, them with their pale faces.

“If that’s the case, then no nobles and knights of the two kingdoms will be spared when the war ends!”

“I took that for granted,” I said, and it wasn’t worth listening to them anymore.

“If we cannot win the war, we are determined to lose everything. I came here with the intention of dying if I could not win.” War as I knew it was far different from what they believed war to be. There can be no safe place in this war, and death comes to all in the same manner as long as they go onto the battlefield.

“This is the war I know – the war of a small country that your empire wants to trample,” I told them as I raised my sword. “If you are lucky, and some of you survive, tell your glorious Imperial Army this,” I kicked a sword at my feet toward them, “Leonberg has bet everything on this war, so the empire should do so too.”

An imperial officer saw the sword that fell before him, and he was struggling with whether he should pick it up or leave it. I decided to relieve him of his indecision.

'Chuk~' I leaped from the ground and fell into the middle of the imperial officers, and those whose throats were cut spewed blood. The knights noticed the situation a moment later, screamed, and grabbed swords.

The people of the empire wielded swords but saw only the sword and not the fighting spirit needed to wield it. The blood from their bodies wetted my blade, splashed upon me.

"You mad prince! You will surely regret this!"

"Die! You war fanatic!"

"Your country will be trampled by the empire! No stone will be left!"

Hearing their shouts and curses, I knew they were small men acting big. I laughed as I slashed out with my sword for a long time until only corpses were strewn around me.

"What? Is there a problem?" I asked the King of Dotrin as I saw him stare at me, and he shook his head.

* * *

The battle was over.

The imperial army could not escape their camp, surrounded by fire, and they were annihilated by the knights and soldiers of Leonberg.

Those who did not leave the camp until the end were burned to death or were trampled by the Wyvern Knights.

There were no survivors.

My allies faithfully fulfilled my order to leave none alive, and once the flames subsided, they searched through the camp to finish off those who were hiding.

"Good work."

Once I had reorganized my force, I told the knights gathered around me that they had worked hard, and their responses were profound.

“Since the imperials were weak to the marrow, there was little we had to do.”

“It’s rather a frustrating situation because my body isn’t even stiff,” Quéon said as he and his knights joined up with me. In fact, the knights of Leonberg, trained in battles against the vicious orcs, were sincerely disappointed by the weakness of the imperial army.

“I can’t believe that such weak-minded guys give the strength of their shoulders to the self-proclaimed ruler of the world. I was excited.”

“If I knew it was like this, we should have made war upon the empire right away.”

I shook my head at the belligerent words of the knights, whose excitement after the battle had not subsided.

“The empire is wide, and there are a lot of knights and soldiers. Not all of them are the same. If there are weak ones, there will be strong ones. Don’t be overly proud of our victories yet. The war has just begun, and we have only defeated a few of the empire’s numerous armies.”

As they heard my words, the knights quickly shut their mouths.

“Sorry. Our thoughts were focused on the moment,” Quéon said as he bowed down and apologized.

It was only after seeing this that I realized that I was being overly strict, but I didn’t try to give them back the joy due to them as victors. As I had said, the war had just begun.

The time will come when we can enjoy our rights as vanquishers; after we completely break the brunt of the imperial army advancing toward the kingdom.

“Your Highness.”

One of the Wyvern knights had left the battle while it still raged, in search of other targets to attack; he now appeared in front of me to inform me of the location of the enemy.

“Three days north from here, there are three imperial legions.”

The report did not fit the pattern of the recon that the Wyvern Knights have done up till now, which was mainly to mark single legion targets marching on their own so that we could minimize the damage to our own forces.

This time, the enemy would be more than worth the risk; it was as expected.

The Wyvern Knight informed me that he had identified the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army that marched up Leonberg, moving through the ranks of the legions.

“What will we do?” the Wyvern Knight asked for my opinion, adding that he could continue to search for enemies according to the original parameters set by our army.

“Let’s hear from the King of Dotrin,” I answered without hesitation.

“The head of their commander-in-chief will be enough to settle our bet, young lion,” said the king.

The battle-spirit of my allies, which had subsided for a while after my harsh words, now once more rose like a sharpened blade into the sky.

CHAPTER 179
THE WAR OF THE WEAK (3)

After a short mourning ceremony for our dead, we headed straight towards our next target.

There was no one complaining that it was difficult, even on a forced march without having rested after a battle. Perhaps this was because of the heightened excitement.

That didn't mean that their fatigue was not there, so I ordered a halt and a rest once the excitement started to subside.

'Chun~' I heard footsteps as I watched the soldiers lay down for a rest. I was laying down as well, so I turned my head back and shifted my gaze to see who it was – a woman who had just removed her helmet, her sweaty hair sticking to her cheeks and forehead, yet still with an appearance as pretty as a painting.

Arwen Kirgayen was looking down at me.

"Your Highness," she greeted me as I looked at her silently, yet her voice sounded taught.

I shifted myself so that my upper body was raised, and as I looked at Arwen, her expression was definitely different from usual. Her subtle, stern face was the same, yet her melancholy eyes were not typical to her.

"It looks like you have something to say," I said, sitting back and waiting for her to open her mouth.

"You couldn't have done anything else?" she asked after hesitating for a long time.

"What?"

"Those guys who surrendered… they laid down their spears and swords and just wanted to have their lives spared."

Arwen's voice was too somber for anger and too dry to be called compassionate.

"It is understandable to behead the defeated generals and hold them accountable. But was it not too much to give such impartial death to the soldiers who were just following orders?"

I said nothing, and I knew that Arwen had been thinking of the recent battle all this time.

"As a victor, I think you could have been more tolerant."

I sighed as I heard her grieving words. I almost wanted to say that she was troubled because she could not cut down enemies who did not resist, and I would have said this, no matter how much Arwen would've yelled at me. But I knew that she had given her best in the battle. She had even let her soldiers pierce their swords into the backs of running enemies to protect the sanctity of my command.

Her anguish deserved respect.

I quietly looked at her face: At those eyes that shone like stars, now so dry, those dark eyes filled with guilt and skepticism. I left it as it was, even if the resentment might deepen in her heart.

"Tchu," I instinctively clucked my tongue.

"It wasn't a battle, but a slaughter," Arwen said in a voice that pierced into my ears.

I got up and looked at her.

"Arwen."

"Yes, your Highness."

"The victor must be tolerant, you say. Have we already won this war?"

Arwen shuddered.

"These four victories must seem so great to you. And when you cut down the cowards, you must have felt that they are weak. You felt compassion when you saw them begging for their lives."

Arwen did not deny this.

“So, is the empire really weak?”

Not even I answered my question.

“So far, we have won. I hope and want it to be the same in the future. However, I don’t think things will play out the same as today. Maybe our day to drink from the bitter cup of defeat may yet come.”

Once more, I did not await an answer.

“We are different from the empire. In all probability, a single defeat will put our country in jeopardy. It’s because this is a war between those who want to defend and those who want to conquer. And because we are weak.”

Arwen chewed on her lips.

“Tolerance is what the strong show to the weak. Tolerance shown by the weak is nothing less than suicide.”

“I am not talking about knights and commanders. I’m talking about the treatment of defenseless soldiers.”

“The soldiers without power,” I laughed coldly at Arwen’s words, “Then I will ask you: Are the powerless soldiers of the empire you speak of less powerful than the people of Leonberg?”

Before Arwen answered me, I asked, “If you showed them mercy, what would that be like? Would you be satisfied and think it enough if you took their swords and spears and released them? And would you be satisfied by taking them prisoner instead of killing them?”

If released, they would be absorbed hale into other legions and would once more point their spears and swords toward the kingdom. If they were taken captive, they would be a burden that slows our march, an extra weight upon our shoulders.

“Do you think we have the power to do that, Arwen?”

One way or another, it was an unbearable burden to the kingdom in its current state.

“On one side, the modesty of mercy, on the other, the modesty of generosity. And such modest chivalry will let the enemy survive and march to the kingdom. Do you believe that they will then be grateful for our generosity and show mercy toward our people and allies in Leonberg?”

I have seen what happens to fortresses captured by the Imperial Army countless times in the past. I have seen what happened to the outlying estates and villages. There was no such thing as a powerless soldier, as Arwen had just said. They were all marauders and destroyers, drunk in their madness.

And in their hearts, there was no grief or sorrow for those who were trampled and ravaged by them.

“Arwen, keep in mind,” I said as I grabbed her cheeks and made her look at me, “our battles are the desperate struggles of those who have been driven to the edge of the cliff. Our every step is precarious, as we ride forth on the thinnest of strings.”

“Look at me. Look into my eyes,” I told Arwen again and again as I stared straight at her darting eyes, giving them a place to go – and her lost eyes managed, at last, to focus upon mine.

“If only to win this war,” I said as I stared deep into her pupils, “I am willing to become the devil.”

I let go of Arwen and looked around. The knights and soldiers had been listening to the conversation between Arwen and me, and I could see that some of them had the same thoughts as Arwen. I wondered why there were so many people with upright virtues in a country which I thought to be rotten, to have gone astray. My mouth was stubbornly set as I spoke to all those gathered.

“So- You will obey my command. If someone criticizes you, tell them that you are merely following the orders of the devil.”

If the day ever comes for someone to pay for today’s sin and bloodshed, that someone will be me.

This would be just a handful of blood sprinkled on the immeasurable karma that I accumulated in my life as a magic sword. No one opened their mouths; silence reigned in the camp. I glimpsed at Arwen and the knights and then went back to bed, but when I covered myself with my blanket and tried to go to sleep, a murky voice

entered my ears.

“I will be the devil too.” It was the captain of the Black Lancers, Quéon.

“Well, isn’t it a compliment to be called the devil by the enemy?” Bernardo Eli jumped in.

Next came the ranger company and platoon commanders, who were having a killer of a time.

“That’s right! It’s real polite-like, innit? Since that’s the case, and I’m the one who was called the Disaster of the Orcs, I’m now the Winter Devil.”

“You’re a disaster for your allies, more like… far as I know, your subordinates call you a devil already.”

“Shut up! No matter who calls me it, I’m still being called the devil, innit?”

And as this started, the knights and soldiers shouted out that they were willing to become demons against the Imperial Army.

“Then, me too…” Adelia spoke up timidly.

“I think you’re already good enough,” I playfully responded as I looked at her. On the battlefield, Adelia was a greater demon than anyone else, a bloody, war-changing demoness.

I was snickering by now and exchanging jokes with the senior rangers, enjoying that unique cheerfulness of Balahard, where death and war are daily life. The central region’s knights and soldiers were sympathetic to this atmosphere, and no longer were their expressions grave as they started shouting.

“We will be a disaster for the Imperial Army!”

“For the sake of Leonberg, we are willing to become demons!”

“Isn’t this the name of our legion?” came Eli’s unexpected words.

“What?” I said with my habitual frown.

“How about it? The Winter Demon Legion? It means that we’re a demonic army that appears from the cold north and…”

I watched as the proud guy talked on, and before he could think that it sounded good to me, I turned away from him without delay, my heart cold.

“I am,” I heard a weak voice speak up, so soft that I had to focus on hearing it. It was Arwen.

“I am your sword,” she said as if thinking back to her oath of vassalage, “If your Highness is a devil, I am your magical sword.”

Her eyes no longer twitched, and I was proud of Arwen, for she had shed the seeds of doubt in such a short time. Arwen, with her tangled hair, lowered her red-hot face. Adelia, who I did not know had appeared, looked envious for some reason, while Eli sneaked out his hand to Arwen but was beaten back by her palm.

I could only laugh as I saw their consistent behavior, no different here than at Winter Castle.

Night passed, and the day was bright once more. We rode our horses in search of the enemy.

* * *

Three days passed, yet we saw neither hide nor hair of the imperial army which the Wyvern Knight had said was encamped three days north. The information of the Wyvern Knights had never been wrong up until now, so our knights were nervous.

“Rangers, scout the area. The rest of you wait here.”

After some time, the rangers who had gone out searching came back and reported that they had found traces of a large legion having encamped in the area.

“The Imperial Army left for the north at least two days ago.”

I frowned; it was never a good sign if the imperial forces marched faster than expected.

“That’s the Wyvern Knight!” a sharp-eyed ranger cried out as he recognized the little

dot flying across the horizon. And, as the ranger had said, the small dot quickly grew and took on the appearance of a wyvern.

'Fswhoo～' the Wyvern Knight landed his mount with a strong gust of dust and shouted urgently toward me without even dismounting his wyvern.

"The situation has changed! Your target legions are quickly heading north, and half of the empire's widespread legions have disappeared! All the Knights of the Sky are currently scattered looking for these imperial legions that have vanished!"

"Why? All of a sudden?"

"The date, the reason, their path, and their purpose are all unknown!"

I chose to dispel the ominous portent of his words and asked for the exact location of the army that we were targeting. Fortunately, the Wyvern Knight had not failed to spot them.

"Currently, your target legions are three days away from here. They are marching northward at a rapid pace."

The rangers had clearly stated that the Imperial Army had left this area two days ago, so the fact that they were now three day's march away meant that their marching speed went against common sense.

"There are very few of them who fell behind!"

The Wyvern Knight explained that there were not many stragglers despite them marching at such a crazy pace.

It meant that their troops were truly elite, unlike the imperial forces we had battled up till now.

Things didn't look good, for an elite enemy force was rapidly marching north and was already three days ahead of us. Even if we marched with haste and diligence, it would not be easy to catch up with them before they crossed the border. And even if we did catch up with them before they gained the border, we couldn't fight our foes if our stamina was exhausted after such a long and hard march. This was a scenario where we had to maintain our stamina, as we had already gone through four battles and were behind enemy lines.

“Well.”

We all briefly discussed the situation and tried to determine the goal of the imperial army. Even though all the leaders shared their opinions in head-to-head discussions, we could not chance upon an answer.

The Wyvern Knight asked my opinion on what had to be done, saying that in two days at most, he would be able to determine the purpose of the enemy by filling in the gaps in his intel.

I had decided on the answer from the start.

“We will march north and catch up with the enemy.”

Time was running out, for up until now, only the Imperial Army had been our foe. From here on out, time itself was also the enemy of our allied forces.

I had to hurry to the border before the enemy’s elite army attacked the Gifted Lion Citadel; before the empire’s lost legions emerged at Leonberg’s vulnerable areas – before the kingdom suffered great damage.

When I asked the Wyvern Knight to determine the location of the lost imperial legions or at least the reason for the enemy’s commander-in-chief to accelerate the march’s pace suddenly, the knight immediately flew north.

After three days of hard marching, we reached a spot not far from Leonberg’s border.

It was then that the Wyvern Knight returned.

“From the beginning, the empire had no intention of attacking the border with precision strikes! The imperial troops on the border and those marching had been nothing but bait, as the main legions have separate goals! They have been aiming for Leonberg’s capital from the very start!”

Through the knight, I finally learned the reason for the sudden changes that had come over the Imperial Army, and I wasn’t pleased at all.

“Currently, your capital is under attack by separate troops and knights of the Imperial Army! The monarch of Leonberg heads to the capital, and he has ordered your Highness to return as soon as possible!”

The knight's report was several times more terrible than I had already expected.

CHAPTER 180
MONTPELLIER! OH, MONTPELLIER! (1)

The first to notice the signs was Crien de Burgundy Montpellier. He was, officially, under house arrest.

In actual fact, there was no reason to restrain him from conducting his personal affairs, for he had already converted to the cause of the Leonberg Kingdom. However, his transference of loyalties was still a classified secret, so he had to play the captive in his current position.

This was the situation to outside eyes, but the truth of it was that he could leave his house anytime he wanted. And on this day, he was studying the atmosphere of the royal capital as he walked through its streets, firmly wrapping himself in his cloak.

“If it wasn’t for that damned fire dragon…”

He couldn’t even use a carriage, and he was grumbling all the time about having to move about on foot.

He only stopped walking when he saw a familiar face in the crowd.

“Huh, why did a knight come to the capital?”

The man was obviously an imperial knight. Montpellier recalled his face with clarity, as they had cooperated several times in previous operations.

‘Shd~’ the knight turned his head toward Montpellier.

“Huk,” Montpellier hurriedly lowered his hood and bowed his head, and swiftly stepped back.

Fortunately, the knight didn’t seem to be following him, and he hadn’t seemed to recognize his face. Montpellier almost sighed in relief, but he found another familiar face before him – there wasn’t just one knight. At first glance, they were dressed like common citizens of the capital, but they were all knights of the empire. And many of

them: The swords of the emperor that served directly under a duchess of the imperial family. Montpellier went to his house before they recognized him.

Before returning home, he checked many times whether he was being tailed, and he even went around to another road and changed his clothes in one of the stores there.

Montpellier's heart pounded. Perhaps they had recognized him, and if they did, they would be suspicious of seeing him wandering around in broad daylight when he should be detained in his house. Perhaps they were assassins sent to recognize his betrayal, sent to punish him.

Countless horrible scenarios came into Montpellier's imagination, and he was so terrified that he stayed up all night. No assassins came, and a sense of relief rushed into his head. Only once he regained his composure did Montpellier realized his thoughts were too delusional.

They couldn't have known that he was a turncoat – they must have come here once the war broke out to rescue the ambassador being held prisoner.

"Wait… Right now, there is no monstrous prince here in the capital," Montpellier mused. Now was his chance to escape from that horrible prince. Unfortunately, he couldn't take the opportunity.

Even if they had come to rescue him, they still had to reach the mainland. By the time that Montpelliers' enemies drew their swords, these knights would scatter like smoke and abandon him.

"How could I have become like this?" Montpellier lamented. He hated the prince and resented the kingdom. His situation was ugly, so he swore at himself and cried again and again.

Then Montpellier finally decided to admit it: Adapting to Leonberg's needs was the only way for him to survive now. He had to avoid returning to the empire and being punished by his political opponents. For him to survive, Leonberg had to persevere in this war against the empire.

The probability of that wasn't very high.

However, Montpellier knew that rather than having his head struck off in vain by the guillotine that his political opponents have prepared, he was more likely to live a

little longer by remaining on the side of the kingdom. And as things stood, he expected his chances of survival to be ten percent, even by siding with the side that offered him the highest odds. Montpellier just wanted the kingdom to stand strong, and as he thought about the war, he suddenly remembered that which he had forgotten.

“Have you ever seen such a crazy man! Forgetting that important thing!”

He started fiddling with a secret cubbyhole in his bedroom, and soon, the hidden space was revealed with a clicking sound. There was a magically sealed document there – the one secret he had never revealed under the harsh beatings of the prince. The imperial ambassadors always knew it to be unlikely, but in the event of war breaking out with Leonberg, they had to act according to a specific protocol.

The sealed document contained such instructions. Montpellier had always believed that there was no possibility that a small country located on the fringes would dare to rebel against the empire, so he had completely forgotten about the existence of the protocols. Montpellier hesitated for a moment and then opened the seal on the document.

‘Pshoo～’ a strange light flashed and spread through the air. Montpellier looked around for a while, his body taught. Fortunately, nothing happened. With a sigh of relief, he pulled out the papers and read them.

The documents contained guidelines and future actions for the empire’s ambassadors to take in the event of a war breaking out.

“Tcha, the emperor is more thorough than I thought.”

Montpellier trembled, for the emperor had been diligent in preparing for the unlikely secession of the kingdom. For a brief moment, Montpellier thought about whether he should escape the capital and act as if his loyalty had never wavered. That’s when the prince’s face came to mind.

The moment he remembered the evil prince, who drew his sword whenever he got the chance, Montpellier’s trembling – strangely – stopped.

“If there is a monstrous emperor in the empire, there is still that evil prince in the kingdom.”

He took control of his quivering heart, and then he thought about it for a while.

“There is nothing else I can do.”

When he finally made up his mind, he called his servant and made arrangements.

Even if the documents he held in his hand were little more than a few sheets of paper, their weight was too great. When someone saw them and misunderstood, then Montpellier knew he would be erased from the world without leaving a trace.

There was no time for delay. If he took one misstep, the ship of his life, which always sailed with full sails, could sink in an instant. Montpellier headed straight to the royal palace, for he had discovered the new greatest enemy to the kingdom.

“Are you not afraid of the emperor’s gaze? His Highness said you should act like a prisoner,” said the Marquis of Bielefeld, but Montpellier banished such thoughts from his mind and went straight to the main topic.

“Look at this.”

“What is it?”

The marshal’s face grew stiff as he recognized the seal of the Burgundy imperial family. He quickly read through the document, and when he had read it all, he looked worried.

“Is this true?”

“I’ve already seen several imperial knights in the center of the capital. I have to say… I have to say that the great plan has already started.”

When Montpellier had spoken his frightening words, the marshal called out to the knight outside the door.

“Are you there?!”

“You called me, sir?” Bielefeld’s knight, who was now assigned to the Supreme Marshal’s office, dashed into the room.

“Go tell the Knights of the Palace to bring all the royal family members into the heart

of the palace! Tell the commander of the palace guard to lock all the palace gates immediately, gather the defenders, and prepare for battle! The capital will also need to be closed off right away. And you must make sure, along with other knights, that all commanders from the deputy-commander level or higher gather in the conference hall of the royal palace!"

The knight widened his eyes at the sudden orders.

"It's a fight against time! Hurry up!"

The great peril in the marshal's voice made the knight's face scrunch up in surprise, and he pounded out of the room. Bielefeld jumped up from his seat.

"Follow me," he said, and Montpellier silently followed the marshal.

* * *

"What is all this about a large offensive?" the queen asked, meeting the marshal and Montpellier in the conference hall.

"Is it possible that your Majesty has not received my message?" asked Bielefeld.

"I got the news. Everyone else is hidden deep in the palace, so there's nothing to worry about. I am only here to represent the royal family in the absence of his Majesty."

It was surprising that the queen was here in the hall and not safely with the others, but Bielefeld was not here to persuade her to go into the heart of the palace.

"Let's hear what's going on first," the queen said.

"The empire has hidden swords under the chin of Leonberg in preparation for war with us since long ago. The knights who have infiltrated the capital is the first sword, and the soldiers of the Imperial Army who have marched with them, camping near the capital, is the second. The third sword is those nobles of Leonberg who have converted to the empire."

The marshal glanced at the Marquis of Montpellier, who spoke.

"Yesterday, I encountered people familiar to me several times. That means that they

are already active."

"You didn't know about their presence right away?"

"I didn't even know of this since yesterday. In fact, we've worked together a few times, but I only realized yesterday that they had not been dispatched to the mainland. I didn't know at all that they were lurking in the capital."

"Hmm."

The queen stared at Montpellier.

"Believe me," he urged.

"When you return to your home country, all that awaits you is the guillotine?" the queen asked, "I'm not so sure that you won't take the side of the empire again."

Marquis flinched and then trembled because it felt as if the queen's words were stabbing into his heart. He wanted to express the sincerity of his loyalties toward Leonberg, but the queen spoke again before he could.

"My son has already eliminated the threat of the traitor nobles, so that's good."

The current situation was surprising, but the queen's voice was consistently calm. The marshal spoke.

"The problems now are the imperial knights who have infiltrated the capital and the imperial soldiers who will soon flock here. The purpose of the knights is to open the gate and cause confusion, and the soldiers will take that gap to enter the capital and finally capture the royal palace.

"I have locked each gate tightly and now plan to strengthen our defenses. In the meantime, I want to find out where the knights are who have infiltrated so that we can sever cooperation between the imperials inside and the imperials outside."

Bielefeld's response ran along the lines of classic methods. However, the queen pointed out that it was insufficient.

"Now that the royal palace and the capital's gates are locked, these knights must have realized that we have come to know of the existence of the operation. It will be

quite difficult to find them if they hide."

"The other actions were most urgent, so I could not arrange a search, your Majesty. This stupid old man has done wrong, so punish me."

"I'm not trying to blame anyone. I know that you, as Great Marshal, have taken such measures because the defense of the capital has to be prioritized. I just wished to give you a little bit of advice," said the queen and then began telling a story about the north.

"Monsters never leave injured people alone once the fight is over. They rather fill their stomachs by eating them all, whether the injured are their own or their enemy. But sometimes, after battling with them, the injured rangers survive and reach Winter Castle."

The queen's sudden story of her homeland might have seemed absurd, but the marshal listened to it without showing displeasure.

"It's harrowing if you can only look at an injured comrade who grunts in pain," added the queen.

"Was it not possible for the brave soldiers and knights to save them, instead of looking at them?" asked Bielefeld.

"You can save them, but there are times when you cannot."

The marshal looked at the queen, who was lost in memory, her eyes shining.

"Because they know the moment that they open the gates and rush out to save the bait which is their allies, countless hidden orcs will rush at them," said the queen as she gazed at Montpellier.

He did not know the meaning of her gaze or her words, and he could not stop himself from trembling.

CHAPTER 181
MONTPELLIER! OH, MONTPELLIER! (2)

When Montpellier first heard the queen's plan, he thought that it was good. Doubts started creeping in when he was bound and dragged to the plaza like a dog and tied to a wooden post. Then, the new governor of the royal palace announced his public execution, listed his crimes, and spoke of the wickedness of the emperor.

Since it had all worked out so realistically, Montpellier didn't even have to pretend that he knew it to be a sham. The people of the capital figured that he would not be spared, as they showed no consideration for the prestige of the empire and the emperor's dignity.

Montpellier could not drink a sip of water during the entire day, but this did not shake him. Everything was going according to the queen's plan, and his suffering and shame was part of that plan.

"The dirty imperial dog!"

"You've been acting like a king! No-good bastard!"

'Lchook~ Pwa!'

However, even if it was for the sake of a grander purpose, the insult was difficult to bear. The humble common folk who usually never lay their eyes on his person now approached, swearing at Montpellier and spitting in his face.

"How dare he?"

"This pig! Wake up, pig!"

Montpellier was struggling to bear their anger; when he focused his eyes, he saw a woman appear from somewhere and dump a bucket full of shit all over him. Montpellier's mind was stunned as the stench slammed into his nose.

"Now you're alert, hey?"

“You’re ugly!”

Montpellier heard the commoners laughing, but he couldn’t even shout out, for he dared not open his mouth in fear that the manure flowing over his face would get stuck on his teeth.

He was treated just like a criminal; the ploy looked realistic.

Yet to Montpellier’s mind, it was all surreal: The soldiers who swore, chuckled and pointed their fingers; the ridicule upon the faces of the royal soldiers and knights who were supposed to protect the sinner, and his shit-soaked clothes.

The night breeze blew in, and unlike the pleasant winds of the empire, it was freezing.

The chill that dug into his body, drenched in waste, was a real problem, and it did not make him feel well. His mind flashed; it felt as if the cold was tearing his skin away.

“Hey, look here. If I stay like this, I will freeze to death. Even if you only give me dry clothes… if that won’t work, please light a fire,” he begged and begged, no longer able to endure.

Neither the soldiers nor the knights gave any heed to his request. Instead, they laughed at him as if he was stupid and told him that he hadn’t realized his situation.

They said that it mattered little if he froze and died. Montpellier had guessed that even if the soldiers didn’t know, at least the knights had to know about the queen’s plan. Still, he surmised that she hid the truth from them to make it confidential. Soon enough, the realization came to Montpellier that he was suffering as mortal saints suffer, and he began to wonder what kind of expression his face had to make for him to look saintly.

He began ignoring the cold and the painful reality of his position. He just waited for the sun to rise and for an end to the farce. The night was deep and long, and now that the crowds who had gathered like flies disappeared, only the knights remained.

While Montpellier endured the cold by clattering his teeth, a man, wrapped in his cloak, approached.

“It’s hard for me not to beat you to death right here! I cannot wait to hear the

grinding of your bones as the ax chews into your flesh!"

Unlike the curses of the anonymous crowd, Montpellier's eyes widened as he heard the man curse him with such desperate emotion.

'Ghak~ Pwoo!' the man spat in his face, turned around, and walked away. Montpellier felt as if he had seen a bit of the man's face, despite him leaving in a hurry.

I'm sure that's not the Great Marshal.

Montpellier shook his head to dispel the thought. There was no way that the marshal, who would be overlooking the plans to deal with the imperial knights and soldiers throughout the night, would come to the plaza without an escort. As Montpellier's dazed eyes looked at nothing in particular, he saw another person appear.

"Since the tears wept by the kingdom because of your deeds are like a sea, I hope tears of blood will come from your eyes. I hope that tomorrow when the sun rises, you will die in pain."

The curse was spoken in a low voice, but the man's sharp jawline was revealed for a single moment from under his hood; a beautiful jawline.

The gracefulness of the man and his sibilant voice that tickled the ears made Montpellier think of someone he knew well.

"Are you Kirga-"

'Schwak' the man slapped Montpellier through the face before he finished speaking.

"I am not Siorin Kirgayen!" the man said in a stern voice and smacked Montpellier a few more times.

Montpellier didn't even get the time to ask the man why he had hit him, for the man hurriedly disappeared from the plaza. Similar scenes played out several times after that.

The scoundrels who kept appearing throughout the night all pressed their hoods down, and Montpellier was always amazed by the parts of their faces that he did see;

they then got handy with him.

The day dawned bright, and Montpellier had been slapped across the cheeks and kicked in the shins many times.

Citizens of the capital swarmed like bees to honey to view the execution. The nobles were sitting on the terraces around the plaza, viewing proceedings as well.

Only then did Montpellier feel shame, yet, he held it back. The current spectacle was the only way for him to repay the sins he couldn't confess and for him to convert to the cause of the kingdom. If all worked out well, we would be well rewarded for learning his lesson and paying for his crimes.

Montpellier dreamed of a bright future as the crowds jeered and cursed his name – and his dreams lasted only till then.

"Before execution, this sinner will be beaten a hundred times to reflect the evil that he has done to Leonberg!" the queen ordered this unscheduled beating as she arrived at the execution site. Montpellier figured that this was part of the act, to make the situation more dramatic.

They will pretend to hit me. My role is to play along and act in pain, to be as plausible as possible.

He thought so, but that thought didn't last long.

'Dwak!'

Montpellier's temple suddenly flashed with pain.

"One!" the executioner shouted after striking, and only then did Montpellier realize that he truly was to be beaten without mercy.

"Ach!" he screamed after the second strike of the club crashed into his body.

"Two!"

Montpellier wanted to crouch, hide, close his legs; he had no choice but to take the beating.

“Ten!”

His flesh began to bruise, then tear under the beatings, and his belief that the current situation was just a facade began to shatter.

“Twelve!”

Are they really going to proceed with the execution?

“Thirteen!”

They probably chose to deal with me and then with the imperial knights.

“Thirty-five!”

So harsh was the unexpected beating that Montpellier gradually became unable to believe in the queen’s promise, and his regret came late. How could he have believed in her word, even being self-confident in this situation? From their point of view, he was just an enemy that had to be dealt with. Indeed, he was embarrassed by his stupidity, thinking that they would accept him as a nobleman of Leonberg once they had dealt with the imperial knights. These were the thoughts flashing through Montpellier’s mind.

His manor would be burned next, once his head fell, and it was clear that his view had been narrow and his body was now paying the price. He had made it easy for those who regarded themselves as his enemies.

“Oh, nobles of the kingdom, I will give you your chance to sate your hunger!” came the queen’s voice, and the executioner withdrew from Montpellier. And as if the nobles of Leonberg had been waiting, they stepped forward as each of them was handed the club in turn.

“My family suffered a lot because of you!”

“You wicked man! Your serpent-like tongue ruined my entire life!”

The nobles were desperate, yet their blows felt like tickles compared to the executioner’s, for they were men who had not truly used their strength in their entire lives.

Montpellier's hopes flared up again; even if he could not pretend with the first blows, he now figured that he would do so moderately.

And just like that, about thirty strikes of the club came and went.

Marshal Bielefeld's turn came, and he stepped up.

The old man said that he would rather use the cane he held in his hand instead of the club the executioner offered him. Montpellier sang with delight in his heart, for such an elderly man would not be capable of dishing out a hard beating, and the ambassador figured that he would be spared a painful blow.

Bielefeld took off his coat, and the body that appeared from under it was not that of an old man. Veins protruded from the muscles that bulged tightly in his sleeves.

"Now, wait-"

'Bwak!'

Bielefeld didn't even give voice to his grudges; he merely swung his cane.

And after that single beating, Montpellier realized that the Marquis of Bielefeld did not sit in the seat of Great Marshal due to his age and loyalty alone. Montpellier was unsure, but he guessed the old man had some proficiency in swordsmanship.

'Dwak! Pwak! Dwap!'

Bielefeld hit Montpellier three times in a row, in total silence, and then turned away as he flung his coat over his shoulders.

"Know that it is not only these nobles, but also the royal family who have suffered from your actions. See now how a queen stands with a club before her people," said the queen as she stepped onto the platform and raised her club – and she started to hit Montpellier.

"His Majesty has shed tears for countless nights because of you! As well the blood of countless knights! Because of you, the Crown Prince was framed and had to waste five of his years to lust!

"I had to watch the spirit of the north become nothing because of you! The reason

my brother went to his death in vain is also because of your fine work! “

“Even if I destroy your flesh and drain your blood, I will never be able to soothe the sorrow in my heart!”

The queen’s beating was as bitter as the tears that flowed from her cheeks.

“It is impossible to count the sins you have committed! And you want to live? You will die, and you will not die in comfort!”

It hurt, and it hurt far too much. It hurt more than the strikes of the executioner and the beating of the great marshal. Despite the pain, Montpellier couldn’t even scream, as his fear was greater than the pain.

The queen’s eyes were so icy. Looking into her eyes was like staring into the north wind, and the inside of Montpellier’s mind turned white. He couldn’t think about the imperial knights, the queen’s promise, or anything else. All he could do was tremble and groan like an animal.

Then, he fainted.

When Montpellier regained his senses, the queen stood upon the platform, looking down at him. Montpellier did not know whether the beating had ceased when he had been stunned, but the executioner now held an iron ax instead of a club.

“Execute the sentence!”

Even now, Montpellier tried to demand that he live, that he would keep his promises. However, he had been beaten to such an extent that his body didn’t have the strength.

“Spare me…” he barely managed to move his lips.

“What?” asked the executioner, who could not hear the words despite being in front of Montpellier’s nose.

“Strike the head off of the guilty Crien de Burgundy Montpellier!” came the queen’s abstracted voice. The executioner put his ax aside, spit into both his hands and took up the ax once more. Then he lifted it above his head, its terrible blade rising into the air.

“Ah?”

‘Montpellier, you fool. Now you finally die miserably, like a dog.’

‘Foosh!’ and the moment Montpellier heard that sharp sound, he instinctively closed his eyes.

However, there was no pain, and there was no pain for some time.

He tentatively opened his eyes. The executioner had been gripping his ax as if he would sever Montpellier’s neck; now, the man had stepped back with an arrow stuck in his forearm.

“I came to save you,” a soft voice spoke into Montpellier’s ear, and he was delighted to hear it.

“Ah!”

It was spoken in clear True Imperial, not the clumsy imperial language spoken by those of Leonberg, but that of those from the mainland of Burgundy.

“I’m sorry for doubting you. We were, in fact, wondering if our ambassador had converted to the kingdom’s cause a little while ago.”

Montpellier’s bonds were loosened, and his body was released and carried away from the pillar to which he had been tied. He saw his savior’s face just before the man placed him on the ground.

It was the same knight Montpellier had first seen on the streets of the capital the day before. The knight supported him, and the sound of imperial knights clashing swords with the capital’s knights came to Montpellier’s ears.

“Close your eyes for a bit. When you wake up, it will be in the territory of our empire.”

The noise that had disturbed his ears subsided – and so, Montpellier fell unconscious.

CHAPTER 182
MONTPELLIER! OH, MONTPELLIER! (3)

Montpellier woke up. Contrary to the knight's words he had heard before fainting, he still found himself in the same state: He was out of the royal capital. He knew this as soon as he looked at the windowless room he found himself in. If he were in the empire, there would be no reason for him to be in such a shabby place.

"Oah," he groaned in pain and then heard that the knights were whispering among themselves.

"Are you awake?" a knight asked him.

"Where are we?"

"This is a hideout in Leonberg's capital," the knight said with regret. "We couldn't get out of the city because the capital's guards were more diligent than expected."

The stern-faced knight then said that a number of imperial personnel had been lost due to the capital and palace knights rushing to the plaza like hornets.

"Ambassador, if only you had checked the document sooner, we could have saved you right away. Why did you read it so late? Has all the magic that was prepared for you become useless?"

"I had to be careful because eyes were watching me."

The knight apologized when Montpellier answered with a grim face.

"I wasn't trying to blame you, ambassador. I am just sorry that you have suffered. You have gone through a lot of trouble, so take some rest now."

"What are your plans for the future?" asked Montpellier.

"Originally, some of us intended to take you to the empire, ambassador. But seeing as things have gone wrong, we must now wait for our allies to attack the capital. Once

they cause confusion, we can find our gap and get out of here."

Montpellier frowned at the knight's words.

"It seems a difficult thing to do, for the few of you who are here. As you saw, the response of the knights and guards of the capital was swift."

"Don't worry. We have enough people. Everyone will be here in the evening."

After Montpellier asked how many people were there and when the escape would be, he shut his mouth, wondering whether there were any suspicions about him.

"I need a little rest," he said.

"I will wake you up when the time comes."

Montpellier gestured with his hand and closed his eyes. He had endured the entire night with a damp body, and he got beaten hard. He was exhausted and fell asleep right away.

It was quite some time until he regained his senses.

'Stop it.'

'How did they get here?'

He awoke to noisy confusion.

"No!" a terrible scream broke into his ears.

"Ugh!"

Montpellier opened his eyes, and the first things he saw were the fully armed knights and smoke in the room.

"Ambassador! Things have gone wrong! The kingdom has found our hideout! We are scattered and have to fend for ourselves!"

The knight roughly raised Montpellier to his feet.

“What is going on?”

“The knights of the capital and the palace have completely surrounded this area! We decided to wait for our allies to attack, but the knights lit a fire! If we stay here, we will be grilled like ducks!”

After his urgent explanation, the knight grabbed Montpellier and started descending the stairs.

“Fortunately, they don’t seem to know about the secret passage. Let’s leave here and head west while the other knights buy us some time.”

“What is in the west?”

“The abandoned fortress where our allies are stationed. A significant number of troops have already marched upon the capital, but there will be enough personnel left that to lead me and you to the empire, ambassador.”

“Give me a sword too. I don’t know what will happen once we leave.”

As the knight heard Montpellier ask this, he unsheathed a dagger from beneath his arm and handed it over.

“Thank you very much. And I’m sorry.”

The knight stopped walking as he heard that strangely cool voice.

‘Fuchook~’ and in that instant, Montpellier stabbed into the back of the knight’s neck with the dagger he had been given.

“Krugh!” the knight vomited blood as he pushed against Montpellier. “Why?”

Montpellier pushed the struggling knight to the floor and said, “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. It’s nothing personal. It’s only that the guillotine is all that awaits me when I return to the empire.”

The knight, who Montpellier had thought was dead, stood up. He grabbed onto the dagger in his neck and pulled it out with his one hand, and raised his sword with the other.

Montpellier was frozen in terror.

However, the knight had been damaged by his neck wound and could not move properly, so he almost staggered to the floor after taking a few steps.

“Now wait! Listen to me!” Montpellier exclaimed as he watched the knight slowly approach him. Montpellier had been planning to catch his breath and run anyway without anyone knowing of it, but the persistent knight’s vitality proved to be greater than he had thought.

“Ambassador, that was a mistake!”

Montpellier backed away, yet the knight moved steadily on and finally came before him.

‘Shh~’ the knight raised his sword.

‘Schklp!’ and as that piercing sound rang out, Montpellier instinctively closed his eyes.

‘Chunk~ degurdegur~’ Montpellier opened his eyes as he heard this new sound. The knight who had been approaching him, sword raised, was now a headless corpse. The man’s head was right in front of Montpellier, the face itself holding a desperate expression with its eyes still wide open.

The smell of blood entered Montpellier’s nostrils, as well as the fresh scent of grass.

And there she stood: A black-haired woman who had appeared like a ghost. She had pointy ears and a beautiful face. It was one of the half-elves who served the prince.

“How are you here?” Montpellier asked, amazed, and he looked around. Both fear and anticipation flashed over his face as he tried to see if the prince was there.

‘jrkff~ jrkff~’ and then, a group of people appeared in the dark passage. It wasn’t the prince, but rather the queen and the palace knights who strode on ahead of her.

“There is a special elixir used by the northern rangers to track down monsters. Its smell is so terrible that you can track a monster with only your nose, even if it is days away. Yesterday, I ordered a palace maid to pour that elixir over your body.”

Montpellier almost asked when the hell she had sprayed it over him, but he then thought of the woman who had assaulted him the day before. At that time, he had thought it to be simple shit in the bucket. It seemed that they had mixed the elixir in there as well.

“I saw you pierce your knife into this knight’s back to save your own life.”

Montpellier looked at the queen with a blank face. He couldn’t imagine how the queen of a country would be hiding in the dark in an enemy-filled building, watching his actions.

Whether true or not, the queen spoke again with a radiant smile.

“I personally despise your kind. If it been solely up to me, I would have cut your throat here and now.”

Montpellier stiffened as he heard those bloodthirsty words that did not match the queen’s smiling face.

“But, as queen, I know that your bloody hands are proof that your conversion to our cause was sincere.”

Only then did Montpellier realize it: Every moment, from the instant that the imperial knights had rescued him, had been part of the queen’s test.

“If I…” Montpellier was sweating. He tried to ask what the queen would’ve done if he had left the secret passage by holding the knight’s hand instead of stabbing him in the neck. But he couldn’t manage to ask the question.

The cold gaze of the half-elf standing beside the queen, as well as the queen’s smiling face, kept his tongue from moving.

“Congratulations, ambassador. As of today, you have been reborn as a citizen of Leonberg.”

The queen gave a bright laugh that did not fit her age. Goosebumps arose all over Montpellier’s body.

“Follow me, Montpellier.”

The queen's attitude was so different from the past when she had always made sure to accord the formal courtesy due to an imperial ambassador.

Montpellier felt strangely dignified as he limped after her. The knights came out of the secret passage and went to strike at those imperial knights still in the hideout.

"Now the seeds sown by the empire are ended. Watch carefully, see it with your own eyes."

When Montpellier heard that, he could not even blink, even though smoke stung his eyes, bringing tears to them. The queen seemed to be warning him that if he had a change of heart later, he would suffer as these knights suffer.

Montpellier trembled, for both mother and son were equally terrible. If he escaped the one, he got caught by the other. He was sick of it.

* * *

It didn't take long for the turmoil to be cleared up.

The imperial knights had breathed smoke for a long time and were not in an optimal condition, so they were quickly overpowered by the royal knights that assaulted them.

There were only two survivors.

The queen personally questioned the survivors without leaving the smoke-filled building that reeked with the stench of blood and meat.

"Tell me everything you know."

"When I see a little girl shouting at me, I know what your kingdom is!" the imperial knight roared like a wounded beast. "Leonberg is like a little girl without virtue! Gschak!"

The knight spat bloody spittle toward the queen's face.

'Chin~' a palace knight reached out, and the spit struck his gauntlet. The knight returned to his position, his face expressionless. The queen also acted as if nothing had happened.

“No matter how much you ask me, you won’t make me vomit out anything!”

The queen did not even lift an eyebrow at the words of the knight who was prepared to die, and she asked no more questions.

‘Shkk~’ the queen drew a sword from where it was sheathed at the waist of a palace knight and sliced it in a downward arc.

‘Qluap~’ the knight’s forearm was severed. “Noo! No!” he screamed. The queen cut off his other hand with her next slice. Her strike cut through flesh and bone and was as good a strike as any knight’s.

“Your kingdom will perish! The Imperial Army will burn it down without leaving a cornerstone of the imperial palace standing!” the knight screamed out his curse.

The queen drew back the sword, and as she swung it again and again, the knight had one leg remaining, then none. The limbless knight cried out from a pool of blood like an animal.

The queen raised her hand, and one of the palace knights stepped forward to stop the imperial’s bleeding. The queen stepped up again, a dagger in hand, and started peeling off the knight’s skin.

Montpellier turned his head away, wanting to see no more of the sight.

“Montpellier, have you forgotten your loyalties?” came the queen’s cold voice, forcing Montpellier to turn his head back. Terrible torture followed, and Montpellier puked several times while he watched. The imperial knight had been ready to die when he had insulted the queen. He now cried like a child and begged for death. The queen did not stop her work. After she had flayed him, she cut off his ears and then started with his nose.

“Will you tell me?”

The knight eventually spoke.

“Woah… his Majesty the Emperor told as to prioritize the annihilation of those in the Leonberger family above all else in the event of a war. He even told me to kill the king, or at least the first and second princes if that was not possible. By now, the legions will be moving with the same instructions.”

The queen looked at Montpellier, her face was ice-cold.

“Well, I didn’t even know about it,” said Montpellier in terror as he hastily shook his head. The queen refocused her attention on the knight.

“My… This is all I know. So please kill me now.”

‘Schlk!’ the queen swung her sword before the knight finished begging. With that single strike, she severed his head – the face of which was filled with fear and pain as it rolled in front of Montpellier.

‘Kwadush!’ Montpellier fell back on his buttocks, and his pants became wet as fright took over his mind.

“Tsu,” the queen clucked her tongue and then gave orders to her knights.

“This other knight will be useful, so put him in the royal prison.”

The imperial knight was still riven by shock as he stared at his comrade’s mutilated corpse. He was dragged away.

“Burn this place down, leave no bodies. Those who died here do not deserve to be buried in the soil of Leonberg.”

“As your Majesty commands!” came the response of the palace knights to the orders.

“I shall return to the palace.”

The queen left the scene, and the knights threw torches into the building before leaving with her.

Soldiers who remained kept stacking firewood as they stationed themselves in the surrounding area so that the flames would not spread. They would make sure that once the fire died down, no sign of a body remained, as per the queen’s order.

* * *

The remnant of the imperial presence was wiped out. During that same evening, thousands of troops appeared at the capital. The flag of the Burgundy Empire was flying in their center.

They surrounded the capital, waiting for something to happen. What they had been waiting for didn't happen throughout the entire night. The day was bright, and a knight who seemed to be high-ranked eventually came forward and shouted, "If you expel those of the Leonberger family from your city, we will retreat without doing harm!"

No answer came, and the knight shouted in a more ferocious voice.

"We will see how many in your capital die because of only a few dozen people! Is this your decision?"

Silence remained the only answer.

"The king you want to protect has already run away! The first prince has also disappeared! The remaining Leonbergers are hiding behind your backs in comfort! Do you want to die for those who are not worth giving your lives for!"

There came an answer this time, not in the form of human speech, but as the sound of something sharp cutting through the air.

'Quap!' an arrow pierced the forehead of the knight who had been talking so loudly. It pierced the exact center of his brow.

"Your dog barked too much! I couldn't listen to it anymore!" a loud voice rang out. The besieging army looked to the top of the wall at once. A middle-aged woman stood there, an iron-armored heroine with a longbow in hand and a golden crown upon her head.

"If anyone wants to bark some more- Go ahead!" the woman challenged as she walked on the battlements. "I will personally teach human etiquette to dogs who severely lack it."

CHAPTER 183
SPLENDID LIKE FIREWORKS (1)

It was two days before the capital was promptly besieged: The night after Montpellier's execution was announced, with him tied to a pole in the plaza, trembling in the cold.

Queen Margarita then summoned a palace knight and instructed him to prepare for a situation.

"You must take the princes and princesses from the capital and protect them in the worst-case scenario."

The palace knight knelt as he heard her words.

"Your Majesty, I have pledged my life to the blood of the Leonberger family. I am now being told to close my eyes and turn my back, by royal order."

The queen boldly laughed at the palace knight's request to give the order to someone else.

"I am not merely telling you to flee in shame. Yet also, it is not an order to hit their lines and enter battle. When worst comes to worst, I ask you to protect the children who will bear the future of the kingdom on their shoulders."

The queen's voice was abstracted, and the palace knight knew there could be no rejection.

"His Highness the First Prince, has asked me to remain with your Majesty, no matter what."

Nevertheless, the palace knight did reject the queen's order by bringing up the command from his master, even if he knew that he was likely going to offer up his life to fulfill it.

"You are Carls Ulrich?"

Carls bowed his head in regret as he heard those words and said, “Your Majesty’s son has an undeserving knight in his service.”

“His presence is an overwhelming one to follow, so it is enough if you just follow in his footsteps. There is no reason for your trembling humility, knight. Doesn’t my son have a temper? I don’t know, but it can’t be easy to follow such an unusual master.”

Carls grumbled. He wished to refute her words, but he dared not tell a lie in front of the queen.

The queen laughed again as she looked at his honest manner, but her smile didn’t last long.

“It is my fault that he grew up so weird,” she said in a sorrowful tone, and she smiled again.

Carls Ulrich listened to her with his head bowed, as if he was embarrassed.

“When that child was born, I wasn’t ready to be a mother.”

It was never a good place to be: In the position of a queen while having to take care of a child, like an ordinary mother. During the nights, Queen Margarita had to fight against blades hidden in the dark, and during days, she fought against those nobles who had become the empire’s dogs.

She lived every day as if she was walking on the edge of a blade. Far from properly disciplining her son, she didn’t even have the time to hug him in her arms. The raising of Prince Adrian was left to the nanny while the queen devoted herself only to supporting the king.

Time passed, and the toddler became a boy, and only then did she learn of all the scandals that surrounded her child.

“It was the servants who couldn’t dare report the wrongdoings of the royal prince. The child was never so insidious before his Majesty and me, so by the time I learned of his insidious nature, I could no longer heal him by my hand.”

Carls Ulrich’s face showed his discomfort and indecision as he listened to such gossip concerning his master. Whether he liked it or not, the queen pressed on.

“I tried to be stern. I tried to be soothing. But Adrian only lowered himself briefly before me, only for his depravity in places that I could not see to get worse.

“I tried to ask my brother to teach the child, but he only confirmed that the boy’s nature was unable to align with that of either his parents. And after his uncle left him, no one was there for Adrian, not even his father.

“By what right could I blame my own child for his ways? He has gotten to that point because I was not there to raise him properly.”

Carls carefully spoke up in sympathy.

“However, Your Majesty did not give up. While everyone in the kingdom failed to see his Highness’s strong will and spoke ill of him, only your Majesty the Queen believed in his Highness and arranged a meeting with Count Bale Balahard again. And so, his Highness became a new man.”

“It is not that everyone else failed to see the child’s strong will. There wasn’t such a thing in the first place,” the queen said.

“But his Highness saved the north and became a great hero in the kingdom.”

Queen Margarita did not respond to the words of the loyal knight. It had been a long while since she had donned iron armor and wielded a bow. She figured that she had become too sentimental and had already said too much.

It was a last-ditch effort that she had brought her brother to the palace to help a son she had almost written off. And if that last chance had failed…

“A lot has gone well, but the child is still unstable. If upright people like you don’t look after him, he will probably burn out in flames.”

The queen wanted Carls to remain with the prince so that he would not scorch himself into ashes.

“I, Carls Ulrich, swear that I will live by the sword for the prince until the day I die.”

Only then did Margarita laugh with satisfaction.

“Then our talk is done, and you have your mission,” said the queen.

“What is your Majesty talking about?” asked the now-confused Carls, and the queen replied with natural grace.

“Didn’t you say it yourself? You said you pledge your life and sword to him. In that case, you shouldn’t be throwing away your life in vain. When a situation arises, you should not forget your oath and plan the future in such a way that you can rejoin with the prince.”

“I did not mean it in such a way-“

“I don’t think a person like you will go back on your word. Or am I wrong about you?”

Carls Ulrich’s insides heated up. If he said the queen is correct, he would have to follow her command; if Carls said no, he would become a faithless person. Margarita gave a pleasant laugh as she looked at Carls’ innocent face.

* * *

“The enemy has begun to advance!”

Margarita was snapped from her thoughts by the garrison captain’s report.

Despite the knight’s mouth being shut by her arrow, the enemy’s morale did not seem to waver. They were indeed a sharpened dagger that the empire had hidden against the kingdom’s throat.

“Archers, do not fire until the order is given!” the queen shouted sternly, and the knights spread across the walls relayed her instructions.

‘Dum~ Dum~ Dum~’ the sound of marching drums came from all over.

“Hfoo~”

The sound of soldiers breathing heavily with tension and fear filled the walls, and even the strongest knights were exhaling hard, overwhelmed by the great force of the advancing enemy.

“A little more- Let them come closer.”

Margarita prevented those who wanted to release their arrows from doing so, again

and again.

The soldiers' breathing became a bit calmer as they listened to her calm voice, which did not match the situation's urgency. However, once the enemy reached firing range, the sounds of heavy breathing flared up once more.

A hundred yards. Ninety yards.

"Must I give the instruction?" the tense captain asked.

"Not yet," said Margarita, shaking her head.

Eighty yards. Now they reached the seventy-yard mark.

'Dumtum~ Dumtum~ Dumtum~'

The slow drumming took on an urgent rhythm, and in turn, the enemy's pace began accelerating.

Sixty-five yards.

The enemy's blazing eyes could now be distinguished by the naked eye from under their helms.

Sixty yards.

"Queen!" came the tense shout of the garrison commander. Margarita raised not an eyebrow.

'Dudududud~' the enemies had increased their speed: They were now running.

And when they finally reached 50 yards, Margarita cried, "Fire!"

The archers let their bowstrings twang upon the queen's order.

"Aaaahh!"

"Kyaap!"

Screams erupted from one enemy to the next. Those hit in vital spots dropped to the

ground mid-run, and those who had suffered minor wounds sat down where they were as they grasped the parts of their bodies where the arrows had struck them.

Those who followed stumbled over the scattered corpses, becoming entangled with those who sat on the ground.

“Ready, second volley!”

The soldiers of the capital were half-enchanted by their first encounter with real battle. They mechanically drew back their bowstrings upon Margarita’s order.

“Fire!”

The confusion of the enemy advance peaked as they were once more baptized in a hail of arrows before they had managed to order their entangled lines.

Margarita continued to encourage the archers.

“Don’t stop! Draw and fire!” Margarita shouted, all the while letting the string of her own northern bow twang as she released arrow after arrow.

The archery of the white-haired queen was truly something to behold, and the knights and soldiers began shouting, their morale raised.

The number of enemies charging at the walls had reached their thousands, however. The archers on the wall numbered only three hundred. Even if there had been initial confusion, the imperial soldiers reached the walls of Leonberg’s capital.

‘Dwak!’ soldiers began striking at the gates with a siege ram.

‘Scklup!’ siege ladders were leveled against the walls.

“Archers, keep firing!” Leave the ladders to the infantry!” Margarita directed, and the defenders who had up till now only watched the archers now took up poles and pushed against the ladders.

“One, two! Heave! Heave!” two or three soldiers supported each other as they pushed the ladders back, and the ladders which had been placed on the walls fell back one after another. Imperial soldiers climbing the ladders screamed as they fell onto their comrades’ heads.

The ladders were quickly righted and pushed back, however. The imperials began climbing to the wall again, and when the royal soldiers tried to push back the ladders with their poles, they found that ladders weighed down with the bodies of many men could not be pushed back as easily as the first time.

“Block them!”

“Die!”

The defenders attacked with sword and spear, and those enemies climbing the ladders and sticking their heads over the wall fell under the strikes of these weapons.

However, the forces defending the capital did not number enough to closely guard the vast circumference of the outer wall. Enemies eventually squeezed through the gaps and gained the walls.

“Your Majesty, we have to give up the outer walls!” the royal guard commander shouted.

“Is this a ruined castle in the countryside! This is the capital of our kingdom! How can the soldiers in the front fight if those in the rear abandon them! And what will happen to the people outside the palace!” came the queen’s sharp reply, and she looked at the walls. Margarita knocked an arrow, drew back her bowstring, and released the arrow with such swiftness that the action seemed invisible. Her arrows flew like beams as they pierced into the heads and chests of the enemies who had climbed to the wall.

“The knights must first deal with enemies on the wall!”

“But then the queen-“

“If the outer walls collapse, I will not be safe either! For now, the priority remains the protection of the city walls!”

The knights scattered to the walls upon Margarita’s command, leaving only a small of their number by her side.

“I will sacrifice my life to protect this city!”

“Believe only in your swords!” the queen replied coldly as the knights roared their martial cries. All the while, her hands were never still, and the number of enemies killed by her bow had already reached a staggering amount. The blisters on Margarita’s finger grew bigger all the while.

Her natural sense for archery has remained the same even after so many years, but her fingers had indeed become those of a retired lady, and they could not easily withstand the strain. The queen’s fingers soon become bloody.

“Queen! Stop firing the bow!” the junior palace knights pleaded, but she gave them no heed.

“The soldiers on the walls are getting their blood spilled! How can I worry about my skin, about scratches that bleed not even a handful of blood!”

The palace knights shut their mouths at her stern words, while the capital guards pushed back hard at the enemy, their morale raised.

It was now the central portion of the wall, where the defenders had the greatest morale, which attracted the attention of the assailants. The offensive began to focus on that portion at some point, and the imperial knights started to charge in, hoping to capture the queen and end the battle.

In the next instant, dozens of knights and soldiers began to climb toward the central wall. Five palace knights swung their swords, trying to stem the tide, and Carls Ulrich was one of the five.

“Your Majesty! Their offensive is intensifying! Please step back and support us from the rear!” Carls begged the queen as he swung his sword in frantic arcs.

‘Schoof!’ he heard a sharp sound instead of an answer as a black blur neatly passed through the gap between him and his sword.

‘Qlchup～’ and an enemy knight, sword raised in mid-strike, was somersaulted back as the arrow pierced his eye through the slit in his helm.

Carls could not help but look back, seeing that the queen remained there even in the intense offensive by an increasing number of enemies.

“Get down!” came the queen’s icy shout, and as Carls instinctively ducked his head,

the queen's fingers danced over her bow.

'Tung~ Tung~' Carls heard as the bowstring twanged twice in the blink of an eye.

"Kaargh!"

"No! My eye!"

There came two screams, and Carls looked back, seeing an imperial soldier with an arrow in his eye and a knight with one stuck into his armpit. Carls hurriedly struck out with his sword and sliced through the throats of the two warriors who had survived.

"Do not worry about my comfort! Focus on the battle!"

The queen sounded like she was scolding him rather than giving advice, and Carls smiled bitterly.

And even amid the tumult of battle, the queen's personality of not losing her spirit whatsoever made Carls think of someone else. Someone familiar.

Indeed: Like mother, like son.

CHAPTER 184
SPLENDID LIKE FIREWORKS (2)

After that, Carls could no longer plead with the queen to descend from the wall.

She wouldn't listen, anyway, and the situation did not allow any opportunity for her to make a withdrawal: The vast outer castle walls were barely guarded by the unsatisfactory amount of troops, and the number of foes who had just entered battle was considerable. If all the imperial knights concentrated on this section of the wall spread themselves out, then the other sections of the wall would fall in an instant.

The queen realized what role she was playing better than anyone else. That was why she shouted from time to time, making sure the enemy was aware of her presence.

She even switched tactics and lured enemies to her if it proved necessary.

"Move east!" she ordered, and Carls and the other palace knights cleared the way with all their might. And when the queen stopped, they would stand by her and cleave into the crowd of enemies. Carls heavily breathed as he cut down another foe, and when he looked around, he noticed that the other palace knights were also breathing hard. The dazzling light upon their swords gradually faded. Carls clenched his teeth.

Even the queen was fighting, firing her bow with bloody fingers. Carls, as a knight, didn't dare show any weakness.

"Hold a while," the queen ordered as Carls began to squeeze more mana from his rings.

"I want to see you hold on!"

Carls had no time to think of whether he could hold on. He simply continued to cut down foes with all his might. That's when there was a tumult within the city, and then came the sound of countless footsteps which ascended the stairs to the wall.

"Queen Margarita! As commanded, I have gathered all capable citizens," the Great

Marshal reported, and the dozens of knights in his service had also appeared.

“Two thousand citizens of the royal road! All are fully armed and ready for battle! Just give the order!” the marshal exclaimed, and the queen’s order was energetic.

“There is no need to wait. Eliminate the enemy on the wall.”

“They’ll do a good job,” the marshal shouted as he jumped up from where he had knelt before the queen. “Citizens of the capital! Help your allied knights and soldiers drive out the enemies!”

There came shouts from all sides.

“Beat the imperial dogs!”

“Protect the queen!”

The citizen militia who climbed the walls was not as professional as those who had learned the martial arts, but their spirits were high.

They were prepared to die as they gripped their swords and spears, and the imperial troops were pushed back, unable to withstand the frenzied momentum. But where could they go if they stepped back over the narrow wall? Driven to the wall’s edge, they clenched their teeth and attacked the militia.

“Ouch!”

“My arm!”

Citizens died in no time as the imperial army’s offensive rose with poisonous intent.

“The capital garrison! What are you doing! Are you going to stand back and watch while the citizens you swore to protect die under enemy blades?”

The defenders of the capital had taken a breather when the militia had rushed in; they now—with angry faces—stabbed their swords and spears at the imperial troops.

Knights let their sword auras blaze as they slashed out. The imperial troops dared not face the momentum of the defenders, and they withdrew from the walls.

And so was the first battle against the imperial army besieging the capital ended.

However, the crisis was not over yet, and when the day next day came, the besiegers attacked the walls with greater zest than the previous day.

Soldiers and citizens of the capital alike resisted the assaults. At the front were the soldiers and militia who wielded their swords, and from the rear, women and children throwing stones or pouring scalding oil.

“Three days at most! Two days if they manage it! If we hold out until that time, the Templar Knights will come,” the commander cried out, reminding all of the incoming reinforcements.

But they weren’t the only ones who knew of the existence of the reinforcements, as the imperial enemy were also aware of the elite knights and their support troops who were marching through the kingdom. The imperial forces were desperate to occupy the capital and capture the Leonbergers before the relief force arrived.

The battle continued day and night.

“Hold on one more day!”

The noble palace knights fell as they resisted the pincers of the imperial knights with all their strength, and the courageous knights of the capital took the lead and died while fighting.

The capital guard, central army, and the high-spirited citizen militia, as well as the women and children who had rolled up their sleeves to protect themselves, fell one by one under the fierce enemy assault.

“Sir Carls,” said the queen, who had not descended from the wall for the past three days. She might have been exhausted, but her iron-hard voice bored into Carls Ulrich’s heart.

“Now the time has come, and you will have to do your favor for me, Sir Knight.”

Even if she hoped it wasn’t the end, the queen was preparing for it.

“I can’t flee. How dare I…” Carls begged to be released from the request in a desperate voice.

“If the enemies cross the outer walls and narrow their siege, there will be no chance. Do what you have to do.”

“What will you do, Queen Margarita!”

“I lived in the capital as a noble lady for decades, but it seems that my soul still lives in the harsh storms of the north.”

Carls Ulrich’s heart sank as he heard that. This was because he knew what it meant to have a northern soul. They were a valiant clan that would bleed out on a snowy field and still has the strength to go on fighting. The queen was about to die along with the now-crumbling capital.

“Your Majesty must take care of the princes and princesses so that both his Majesty and his Highness can stay strong! How can the mother of the country share her destiny with those dying upon the wall!”

“My brother also fell into the blizzard trying to protect his walls, and so did my father and grandfather. It is not a new thing for my family to share the destiny of the wall.”

“Live and plan for the future! The queen can live on and do more!”

The queen smiled gently as she looked at the now-weeping Carls.

“If I leave, their anger will remain intact, and they will take it out on the citizens of the capital. Those who burn down the capital will scatter upon the winds like migrating birds, and Leonberg will have to fight hard with the empire while such troublesome seeds still exist in our lands.”

The queen said that someone had to remain and hold the imperials back until the Templars arrived. She emphasized that only she could play that role.

“Go ahead. The nets that are spread will still be thin, but they will soon become tighter.”

“The western wall has fallen!” one of the soldiers of the capital guard shouted in terror just as the queen finished speaking.

“There is no time to delay,” the queen said as she pushed Carls on his back. “Please, please… I hope to see you again. There are a hundred cavalrymen and knights before

the north gate."

Carls Ulrich turned away and left, and dozens of palace knights followed him under the order of the queen. The queen looked at their receding backs and grabbed her bow, and stared at her enemies.

She held the bow with fingers so crushed that their shape was unrecognizable. Then she drew back the bowstring, her face stern.

One, two, three arrows were loosed one after the other. Four, five, six. Every time a missile flew through the air, an imperial died, but far more defenders and citizens were dying. Seven, eight.

Suddenly, an old memory passed through Margarita's head. She remembered the face of a man who looked at her with a proud expression, as if he held the world in his hands, even though he had just missed a target by a foot at fifty yards.

The Balahards can hit that target with their eyes closed, so Margarita had experienced a hard time, trying to hold back her laughter, hunching her shoulders, and suppressing a giggle.

Eventually, she shot two arrows off-target because she was trying not to laugh.

"You told me how great an archer you are. How did you miss those two shots on that day?"##

As time passed, the man became a king, and he always wondered about that day's events. She never dared tell him that she had made a mistake while holding back her laughter because he had been so funny.

She couldn't say that her bow had shaken without her knowledge because the one who would become king couldn't get a woman. And so, Margarita had just laughed.

The man misunderstood, thinking she had missed because she had been so pleased with him. She had laughed again because that was even funnier.

Margarita forgot her pain after smiling so much and slowly drew the bowstring back with her crushed fingers. She held her breath as she aimed at an enemy.

"Fwoo," the queen took a short breath and stopped her breathing. At that moment,

the arrow was loosed, and it pierced through the air, and this time, it was not off-target, like on that day so many years past. An unwitting knight had climbed up the wall and was encouraging his soldiers—he died as the arrow struck into his armor.

Neither did Margarita's eleventh or twelfth shot missed their targets.

"Thirteen. Fourteen," the queen muttered softly. "Fifteen." Each arrow that left her bow ended a life. 'Crwak!' the moment she tried to go for her sixteenth kill, the bowstring snapped, and the bow cracked. The northern bow had done its best in the harsh battles of the past three days. Margarita threw her lifelong love to the floor and drew the sword sheathed at her waist.

"The queen is over there!" imperial troops shouted as they saw her, and they flocked to her.

"I am sorry. So many promising people are dying hard deaths to protect their masters," said the queen.

"Don't say that. Every moment of our service has brought me honor," one of the remaining palace knights said. "I wish to serve your Majesty all the way. I will greet hell in advance! Please be careful."

"Infinite respect to Queen Margarita!"

That being said, the palace knights lighted their swords and rushed at the enemies. The imperial soldiers could not advance with vigor, faced with the charge of the kingdom's elite knights who were prepared for death.

It is, of course, impossible to block ten hands with one, so in the end, the knights all died, fighting fiercely as the pincer of the imperial knights closed in upon them.

The citizens of the capital filled the gap left by the death of the palace knights.

"My Queen! We'll but time! Hurry up and get to safety!"

The citizens were pierced and sliced apart as they faced foes that not even the palace knights could best.

"It was an honor to be with you," the queen said.

“Don’t say that! We will surely beat these rats back. So come on, get out of this place-” the big man with the loud voice died as a sword ripped into his throat.

“Protect the queen!” the men shouted as they formed a wall with their bodies. It was a fleshy wall and the blades of the imperial knights easily cleaved through it, leaving bloody corpses in their wake. The gaps were filled by women, the maids of the royal palace who held daggers which they could not even stab with properly. The maids were trembling, but they did not get out of the way. The knights of the empire spat out abuse as they faced the maids. Things had reached this point, but it didn’t seem as if the imperial knights were going to proclaim a newfound chivalry to exist in their breasts.

“Go back! I am not one who hides behind my people, but the one who should stand at their lead,” the queen ordered the maids as she fixed her sword, but they didn’t get out of the way.

The imperial knights stepped back, making way for spear-wielding soldiers. Their eyes were full of base desires as they saw the maids, possessing a beauty that the soldiers couldn’t even dream of.

“What you have to preserve is not my comfort, but your lives,” came the harsh, blade-like words of the queen.

‘Pshwoo~ Pop! Pop!’ a flared flashed into the sky from afar. The first one was followed by another. The first signal meant that both the princes and princesses had safely escaped the capital, and the second meant that the Great Marshal was making his escape after recovering the surviving troops. The third flare was to be fired by the queen, but she did not fire it, nor did she turn around and flee. She never held the intention of escaping the capital from the beginning. Someone was needed to remain and draw the attention of the imperials while the others escaped, and, if possible, draw out the battle until the Templars arrived.

And Queen Margarita believed that this role was her own to fulfill. It had worked: The Imperial Army didn’t seem to care about the two groups who have escaped from the capital because their attention was focused upon the city walls. Margarita was confident that she had accomplished her mission quite well.

She knew that the final moment was imminent. Soldiers turned their spears aside as they started to push against the maids. While the maids were being pushed, and as

they fell, they did not resist with their daggers. They knew they could not best the fierce soldiers, and they felt ashamed.

So, they chose to hug the soldiers and thrust themselves from the wall, rather than surviving as cowards for the rest of their days.

Twenty maids grasped soldiers, all plunging to their deaths in that deadly embrace.

Soldiers looked down the wall with haggard faces, and the knights who had retired for a bit came forward and advised the queen to surrender.

“If you surrender, we will spare your life. Of course, you will have to endure shame.”

Queen Margarita dropped her sword.

The imperial knights believed she had surrendered—this was not true.

“You want me to fade out as if all is lost? That is not enough. I will burn out like the greatest flame, to the very last moment!”

Instead of surrendering herself into the hands of the imperial knights, Margarita walked to the edge of the wall.

“Don’t! Stop it!” the knights shouted as they rushed in.

Before the knights could catch the queen, she threw herself from the wall.

Margarita closed her eyes.

I’ll go ahead and wait for you. Please do everything… and only come to me later.

* * *

“Margarita Balahard was born as the eldest daughter of the formidable Balahard Family. She left the north for the First Palace at the relatively young age of 17, becoming the spouse of his eminence, the Crown Prince Lionel Leonberger.

Margarita Balahard possessed the requisite wisdom and gentility to serve as the Mother of the Country. Her only flaw came in the person of the First Prince Adrian Leonberger, who eventually developed into the Hero of the North after he had

formed great discipline and conquered the adverse elements of his personality.

In the war against the Burgundy Empire, Queen Margarita saved the royal capital, which was almost razed due to the dark works of the Burgundy imperial family. Queen Margarita defended the spirit of Leonberg by defiantly throwing herself from the walls.

It was at the age of 39 that Queen Margarita committed herself to the defense of the royal capital, with the number of imperial soldiers slain by her virtuous arrows reaching the mark of 150. The imperial knights and commanders who lost their lives due to her true and unwavering aim reached a whopping 70. When these figures became publicly known, no one was surprised.

And so did Queen Margarita end her life, burning fierce to the very end, and the Leonberg forces, after her death…"

*Excerpt from 'The Life of Queen Margarita Balahard-Leonberger,' from the 'Records of the Lions of the North and the Leonberger Family,' which Niccolo Marchiadel has composed from events he had personally witnessed and experienced and described as objectively as possible.

CHAPTER 185
THE EMBERS BECOME FIRE AGAIN (1)

Arwen suddenly looked back. The morale of Leonberg's army had reached sky-high with successive victories. Now the troops, with impatient faces, were riding their horses as if they were being chased. No one spoke in the heavy silence as the entire force hurried on.

The Wyvern Knight had disappeared amid the thundering of hooves over the silent wilderness. He now returned and reported in an urgent tone that the imperial commander-in-chief and his three legions who had crossed the border had returned south. The imperials had faced an unexpected obstacle and had to return to their border fortress, and their target was now the prince's legion.

It wasn't just that: The imperial legions that have hidden have appeared all at once. It seemed that their target was also the legion of Leonberg, which was moving north.

"What should we do?" Count Brandenburg asked. The prince looked at the Wyvern Knight and said in a bitter voice, "This is the only chance we'll get, while the enemy's encirclement has gaps."

"We Knights of the Sky will lead the way." The Wyvern Knight soared high into the sky after he had appointed himself as guide to the allied forces.

"Go."

Everyone rode on at a maddening pace from then on, resting only if the Wyvern Knight disappeared from view to scout the surroundings. Horses and riders both quickly tired. The martial spirit that had risen after the last four great victories plummeted and the suppressed fatigue came out all at once.

"Well, if anyone sees us, I think we'll be the losers."

The prince felt the atmosphere among the men and laughed brightly, beseeching the knights and soldiers, "How can you northerners have such heavy hearts after going out on a pleasant horseback excursion?"

“It was pretty hot for a vacationing tour,” Balahard’s senior rangers piped up pleasantly, matching the beat of the prince’s mirth. The atmosphere became lighter, and Count Brandenburg, master of the Iron Hawk Archers, asked the first prince whether he was encouraged by such an atmosphere. “The royal capital will be okay, right?” the count then asked.

The air of elation that had risen now quickly sank. Count Brandenburg regretted his frivolous statement, but he had already spilled the water from the pot.

The first prince looked around as he studied the subdued atmosphere and replied, “Even though the main force under the command of his Majesty has marched away, there are still a thousand elite soldiers of the capital garrison and the central army in the city. There are dozens of palace knights, who are said to be the best in the kingdom, and a hundred of the capital’s knights. The Templars are two days away, and they will come to the rescue. There is no way that our forces in the capital won’t last till then.”

It was a very reasonable statement because the capital’s defensive strategy was that the Templar Castle troops were to intercept the approaching enemy first.

Even if something went wrong and the enemy reached the capital by avoiding the Templars, the capital garrison and central army could buy time until the troops from the Templar Castle reached the city.

“The capital will never be pierced unless the enemy has mobilized at least three legions.”

The kingdom has strengthened its borders immediately after the imperial declaration of war. The Southern Legion was not so incompetent as to fail to detect large-scale movement by imperial legions.

“The purpose of the empire will be the assassination of the king, or at least to shake our soldiers on the front by making the rear unstable. Either way, they will not achieve their purpose.”

The words of the first prince were valid and rational in every way. Nevertheless, Arwen was unable to shake off her anxiety, and she later realized why she could not get rid of her nervousness. The first prince’s expression was engraved in her eyes: The slight stiffness of his face; he didn’t seem as comfortable as he usually did. And

this expression was held by a prince who never lost his composure, even in the midst of battle. Arwen became even more nervous as she realized this, but she was the only one who noticed such signs. Others were swaying their heads along, their faces showing that they were reassured by what the prince said.

Arwen tried to control the features of her own face, as there was no need to create a disturbance through undue speculation. And if her guesses proved correct, there was no good to be had in the current situation, so she kept her mouth shut.

The Wyvern Knight was seen in the sky again after he had disappeared to explore the area.

The short break was over, and the troops began moving once more, crossing the border. They only had a day's ride before reaching the Gifted Lion Citadel.

'Kyee eeh eeh!' the wyvern suddenly cried out in warning as it flew on ahead. Then it flew in two wide circles over a single spot. It was a signal meaning that two enemy legions were ahead.

"We're going through as is," the prince ordered, choosing to break through rather than retreat. He reasoned that it would be foolish to turn the horses around and avoid battle if the encirclement was already so narrow. There were no objections, and the general anxiety diminished. Still, the knights were quite exhausted and wanted to reach the citadel as soon as possible.

"I will stand with the vanguard," the prince said as he drew his sword and took the lead. The Black Lancers and Knights of the North lined up behind him.

"Do not fall from your horses! Especially you, rangers – your horsemanship has definitely not improved with time."

Nervous soldiers laughed when they saw the ranger's pouting at the prince's unexpected criticism.

"If you aren't sure of yourself, just hang on and focus on riding. Our goal is to break through, not to annihilate."

The rangers replied that they would hold on for their dear lives. Once more, the soldiers and knights burst into laughter. The troops reached the hills in the meantime, and again the signal came from the Wyvern Knight, saying that there

were two enemy legions.

“So- Let’s go,” the prince said and lowered his helm’s visor, ‘Cheolkup.’

The horses began to trot to the front, and Arwen also lowered her visor as she controlled her breathing. It had been a relaxing trot at first; now, the vibrations that ran through her lower back gradually increased and soon become a vigorous vertical movement as the horses entered a canter.

‘Dudududududu~’ the sound of hoofbeats shook the earth as it spread through the wilderness. The imperial army only then discovered that Leonberg’s forces had suddenly come up behind the hills, and they sprang into frantic action as they readied their battle formations.

The longspearmen took up the front ranks as they readied their pikes at an angle, awaiting their foes. Immediately behind their lines stood the archers, who were busy moving back and forth as they set up their firing lines. Before long, the angled pikes were formed into tight, narrow lines, before the archers have even knocked their first arrows.

“Charge!” the first prince ordered.

The horses have passed through the hills and started galloping like crazy, and through the thunderous rumble of hoofbeats, the unique keening of the prince’s blade could be heard.

‘Woow~’ And at the same time, knights began to rotate their rings madly, and the familiar energy wave of war was soon felt. The leading prince kicked his horse into a jump toward the center of the spearmen’s wall, and he slashed out with his sword. The bursting flash of his strike sundered the pikes, and soldiers beyond the spearwall collapsed like wet sorghum in the wind.

Arwen stopped gazing at the prince as she struck down her sword—shining with starlight—and it pierced through the longspearmen like a meteor shower. The golden and pale Aura Blades burst out one instant later as they cleaved through the archers beyond the spearmen.

The imperial troops, unsurprisingly, collapsed without being able to withstand the onslaught. The prince did not maximize the advantage he held in the battle by trampling over as many soldiers as possible or by wheeling his mount around to

decimate the collapsed ranks. He merely charged on ahead, scattering those foes that blocked his way.

Arwen also rode after the prince, and Bernardo Eli and Adelia rode by her side as they helped break through the lines and open the way completely.

The first prince was already getting ahead of them.

"…!" A knight in fancy armor blocked the prince's way, and judging by the brilliant glare emanating from his sword's edge, he was surely one of those paladins that the empire boasted of.

"…!" the paladin gave an eloquent roar as he thrust his sword out. However, there was no opportunity for him to demonstrate his martial prowess.

The prince's sword struck out like a whisper, and despite the paladin hearing the sound of the sword heading his way, he could do nothing when the prince, under momentum, cleaved him in two. Even after having split a paladin down the middle with a single strike, the prince did not give a cry of victory.

"Get out of here! We have no time for this!" came the prince's nervous orders as he continued to crush through foes in quick succession. The imperials began to retreat, overwhelmed by the momentum of the charge, and the prince rode through the path that they opened without looking back.

And when the enemy once more blocked off his front, the prince charged into their ranks as his Aura Blade cleaved through them. The cavalry charge did not slow for a moment. Arwen and the other Sword Masters ranged to the left and right, to the front and rear as they cut down enemies, making sure that their allies did not get isolated as they tried to follow the prince's rapid breakthrough.

"We have broken through the enemy!" someone shouted at one point. It had taken a short time to charge through two entire legions. However, there was no time to celebrate the remarkable achievement. The prince still rode on, and the knights kicked their horses' flanks, urging the beasts to follow him. Arwen had been in the rear for a while to take care of the slower riders. She now looked at the imperial army. They did not even think of reforming their collapsed ranks. Instead, they were staring at their disappearing foes in despair. They had been thrown into complete disarray by the insane breakthrough.

Arwen watched them for a moment more and then left the battlefield with some rangers who had lagged behind. The entire force was able to reach the Gifted Lion Citadel that evening.

“Good work.” The king personally oversaw the opening of the gates as he greeted the returning force, congratulating them on the spot for their four overwhelming victories and their hard work. There was no official victory parade or non-military proceedings because the war was not over yet. The hospitality of the citadel was modest, considering the returning force’s remarkable achievements.

Still, no one complained, and many noticed that the king’s complexion did not look good at all.

King Lionel had already looked old for his age before due to all his effort spent for the sake of his kingdom. He now looked like a true old man, and by looking at his wrinkled face and sagging skin, it would be hard to believe that he was indeed middle-aged, a man in his forties. The first prince was also surprised to see how the king had aged, so much so that he couldn’t even say thank you when the monarch congratulated him.

King Lionel led them inside.

The prince had asked nothing about the capital up to that point, and the king seemed to have no intention of speaking first in mentioning the news about the royal city. It was as if both royal men were consciously avoiding talking about the capital. However, the city’s security was a major issue, and there was no way to delay discussing it forever.

Arwen took a quiet breath, and when she thought she was prepared, she stepped out cautiously and asked the king, “Your Majesty, is there any news about the capital?”

The prince trembled, and the king looked at her with dry eyes.

“Not yet,” answered King Lionel. Arwen struggled to read him, for he had given a calmer answer than she had expected. If anything major had happened, someone would have already delivered the news. And according to the prince, there was no way that there would be a significant change in the capital.

Arwen had told this to herself many times. After walking with the king for a long time, she suddenly stopped.

“Well?”

Arwen looked up at the sky and saw snowflakes starting to fall in their ones or twos. The king and the prince also stopped and looked up to the sky.

“Is it already winter?” the king asked in a dry voice. Arwen’s gaze shifted to the king’s shoulders as knights who had been watching came over and threw a thick fur cloak over them.

“Please come inside,” the palace knight commander urged, and the king began moving again. However, he could only take a few steps when he stopped and looked at the northern sky. As if feeling the same thing, the prince also stopped and looked into the distance. They frowned as they watched the snowfall getting thicker, with a small dot appearing beyond it.

The dot quickly became a large shadow, and then a wyvern.

Neither the king nor the prince spoke as the wyvern finally touched down in the citadel’s courtyard. From the moment the beast had appeared, it seemed as if both royal men froze.

‘Chik~’ the Prince of Dotrin, whom Arwen had seen several times, leaped from the top of the wyvern and landed in the courtyard. Neither the king, who had always handled Prince Doris as an ally, nor the first prince, who was always happy to see Dotrin’s prince, said anything. Prince Doris also remained silent, as if his lips were glued together.

“Sire,” the Prince of Dotrin started talking after a long time, “currently, the imperial military occupies some of the outer sections of the capital, as well as outlying regions. The knights and soldiers of Leonberg who had marched upon the capital have managed to recapture seventy percent of the outer city. In addition, according to up-to-date information, it is said that most members of your royal family, as well as the heads of military, have escaped safely just before the fall of the capital’s outer walls.”

Prince Doris quieted for a moment after delivering such grave news. When he spoke once more, his voice was beset by terrible grief. “However… It has been confirmed that the queen is not included among those who have safely escaped.”

Doris spoke in a pained voice as if he was forcing his lips open just so that he could

squeeze out words that he did not wish to speak.

“I will say it again. Her Majesty the Queen resisted the enemy and attracted their attention until the very end. At the last moment… she cast herself from the wall.”

Arwen’s heart pounded, and it felt as if it fell from her, so terrible was the anguish.

Her face paled as she looked at the prince and the king. The two royal men were expressionless. Both of them looked on with empty eyes.

CHAPTER 186
THE EMBERS BECOME FIRE AGAIN (2)

“Sorry.”

The Prince of Dotrin did not know what else he could do as he looked at the two royal men of Leonberg.

“I’m really sorry.”

He kept his head down and apologized as if all the catastrophes had been his fault. The king opened his mouth, his dry lips hardened, and he closed his mouth. No sound escaped from those lips.

The king murmured silently many times as if he had forgotten how to speak.

“Sire,” the palace commander said as he looked at the king’s regret-filled face. The king did not answer.

“Sire!” Nogisa called out, tired of the tension.

Only then did King Lionel make a sound.

“I am just grateful for the hard work of the prince who flew here in bad weather to deliver the news.”

The king spoke in a dry, haggard voice as if all the moisture had been sucked from his body.

“Your wyvern will not be able to fly in this weather, so we will provide you a place to rest. This is a fortress in wartime, so there will not be much comfort. But on such a bad day, the imperials tend to prepare for winter, so leave your concerns aside,” the king instructed in that same dry voice.

“It looks like the snowfall is increasing. The commanders will have to double-check to make sure that all supplies and material in the citadel does not become wet or

frozen."

"Sire," repeated Nogisa.

"On snowy days, it always seems that it is less cold, so it is not so great an issue. But it is unusually cold today. The hardships of the soldiers on the wall will be indescribable, so ready the supplies you have stored away so the soldiers can warm up."

The king had seemed to forget how to speak a while ago, now he spoke without stopping.

"It will be okay to light bonfires on the wall-"

"Sire!" came the reckless shout of the palace knight commander as he interrupted the king. "Leave the work of the citadel to us."

The king grew silent as he heard Nogisa's words. He turned, but he did not take a step. King Lionel stood there, his back turned, for a while and then asked, "Her body… Did you find her body?"

The king wanted to know what was done with the queen's corpse.

"They haven't found it yet," Doris replied.

The king looked up at the sky in response. His back looked unusually old and slumped, perhaps because of the snow piling up on his head and shoulders.

"Once more, I am grateful for the prince's hard work in delivering this news without reluctance by traveling over a vast distance. I hope there will be no inconveniences during his stay."

King Lionel spoke of Doris's toil in a subdued voice and departed. The Prince of Dotrin stayed for a while and then hurried away. All who remained was the first prince and his knights.

Arwen's attention had been focused on her master all this time. The prince seemed shocked and incapable of believing the news of his mother's death. He did not look normal.

“Your Highness,” Arwen called to the prince in a deeply subdued voice.

“Uh? Uh,” the prince replied as he shook his shoulders.

“The wind grows cold. We must go inside.”

“We should. I have to go in.”

Prince Adrian’s answer sounded somehow lost, and his eyes twitched; they couldn’t find a place to focus on. Arwen had seen the prince like this in the past when he had been barely conscious after his mortal wounding in the battle against the Warlord.

The prince looked exactly the same that time as he did now. Arwen was filled with sorrow as she took in his appearance, so much so that she couldn’t offer comforting words.

Bernardo Eli didn’t notice this, asked suddenly, “Well then. Are you okay?”

“What?” the prince asked.

Eli couldn’t mention the queen’s death with his mouth, so he was left speechless.

“Oh, you don’t have to pretend to be so calm in front of us,” Eli then said, and so uncomfortable his words that they sounded absurd to those hearing them. Eli did not know of the first prince’s sincere thoughts, and Arwen wanted to seal the mouth of a man so unaware of matters in the most radical way she could.

“Bernardo Eli.”

“Sir Arwen?”

“Shut that mouth.”

Eli did not know why Arwen would say this, did not realize that he had spoken awkwardly. Still, he was taken aback by the sorrow in Arwen’s voice, so he kept quiet.

“What? Why is everyone looking at me with such faces?” the prince asked in a cheerful tone.

“I’m fine. It’s really nothing,” he added.

The prince did not seem to know what his face looked like or how his voice sounded to the others. Adelia Bavaria’s meek eyes were already hazy with tears, and Bernardo Eli, still unaware, merely chewed on his lip, his face pale. The other knights also looked at the prince as if they were sorry, and they left their hatred for the empire to the side.

“I mean it if I say I’m okay,” the prince emphasized, and it wasn’t a lie; he really seemed to believe it. That was even more regretful, and Arwen’s stomach felt a bit cramped.

To her eyes, the first prince looked like a child who had made a big mistake, and not getting the punishment he deserved made him restless. He had looked like this in the days when he had believed that his uncle’s death was his fault. His burden and his sickness to bear alone.

“Oh really! If a person says they’re okay, they are,” the prince said in anger.

“Don’t look at me like that!”

After a while, he turned around and went ahead. Adelia Bavaria quickly followed him. Arwen gave a small sigh. And then, the prince was out of sight.

* * *

When I had first awoken in the body of the prince, the queen had been a mere nuisance.

It was very uncomfortable to see her look at me with those intense, calm eyes, without her knowing that someone had taken over her son’s body. It was unbearably uncomfortable, so I always made all kinds of excuses to avoid the queen, to avoid any encounter with her if possible.

And when I was forced to sit by her, all I could think of was how to get out of that seat.

“Why don’t you look straight at your mother?”

“You don’t even call me mother anymore.”

The queen had been regret-filled then, and I could see the sadness in her heart on her face. Nevertheless, she always looked at me with a steady gaze. At that time, I had closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, and she had sat by my bedside in silence for a while. Her hand then clenched mine, and she left. After she was gone, my mind had been blank for some time.

The warmth of her grasp had remained on the back of my hand, my palm, my fingers, and it had worried me. It was a kind of emotion I had never felt before, but I knew: The unconditional love and warmth she showed were not for me. It was her motherhood expressed toward her real son, the original owner of this body.

Knowing that had made me more uncomfortable because her love was a reminder of my sin of taking the body of another person.

It was different when dealing with the king and the others because they had wanted me to do things. I figured that it was enough to satisfy their wishes because they hadn't liked the original owner of this flesh in the first place. I believed I truly deserved their praise and feelings expressed toward my achievements.

But the queen was different. She asked nothing of me, and she was the only one who loved Adrian, who everyone hated. I never knew how I could pay back such unconditional love.

As time passed, my feelings did not diminish but instead grew greater. Later, even listening to her voice made my heart overflow with emotion.

The queen was an uncomfortable being to me, and I had thought that I wouldn't have any feelings were she to die. It was not so.

"However… It has been confirmed that the queen is not included among those who have safely escaped."

The moment I had heard Doris speak, my heart sank.

"I will say it again. Her Majesty the Queen resisted the enemy and attracted their attention until the very end. At the last moment… she cast herself from the wall."

An unknown emotion had welled up from deep inside my body. It wasn't sadness. I never had enough emotional exchanges with the queen while she lived for me to mourn her death. My relationship with her had always been what she had given

unconditionally. The emotion was also different from what I had felt at the time when my uncle had died. I had clearly known what I was feeling at that time.

It was not so now. I couldn't understand my heart; it was just confusing. That was probably why Arwen and the others couldn't stand looking at me, filled with sorrow as they were.

It felt as if their gazes were rebuking me. As if they pointed their fingers at me for not being sad about the death of my mother. It felt like they were decrying my brazenness for taking the body of another.

Of course, I knew that I was just projecting my emotions onto them, but I couldn't control my heart even though I knew this.

I eventually got angry and left them, almost fleeing. I had existed as a sword for centuries and had the spirit of a Master, and yet my emotions felt unclear. My chest felt cramped as if some weight was crushing it. My turmoil became real because I couldn't figure out what the hell this emotion was that was squashing me like some big rock.

So, I took up my sword. I thought that my inner atmosphere would become less suffocating if I trained. The winter's weather was rough when I went to the citadel's courtyard.

I breathed in the cold air, yet no matter how much of it filled my lungs, the constriction inside of me was not released. I swung my sword like a madman, and I swung and swung as I sang a poem until all the mana within my body drained away. I sank to the floor, exhausted.

My emotions were still the same. I was sitting there, blank and staring at the sky, when someone put fur over my shoulders.

"Your body looks like an ice cube. Stop this and get up."

It was Arwen's voice, and when I turned around, I saw Adelia's tearful face next to Arwen's stern visage. It seemed that Adelia had called Arwen when she saw me run into the blizzard like a crazy person. I looked at them for a while and then turned my head back.

"Your Highness."

Arwen forced me to stand when I didn't get up. She then pulled me with force.

"Agh," I spat out as she led me on.

When I woke up, I was lying on a bed in dry clothes. I felt a chill. I trembled, and I grabbed the hem of the blanket as I curled my body up.

I was sick all night, and in the midst of that confusion, someone's voice came to me.

"There is no need or reason for anger and sadness.

"Cry when you are sad, and be angry when you are angry."

I would do that from now on. I tried to ask who it was who spoke, but my lips failed to form words. All that escaped from my throat was a fevered moan.

And when the next day dawned, I woke up well. The high fever that had boiled within me, and the emotions that had suppressed my heart, had disappeared as if they had been illusionary.

"Your Highness!" Adelia, her face haggard and eyes watery, as if she had been by my side all night long, ran into my arms. One foot away from the bed was Arwen, her complexion also shabby as she looked at me.

"I have caused you useless worry," I told them.

"You are good now, so that's it," said Arwen, the relief clear on her face.

"But who came to me at night?" I asked as I wiped away Adelia's tears.

Arwen nodded and said, "His Majesty was here overnight."

"His Majesty?"

"He did not stay for a long time, but he personally took care of your Highness's body during his stay," stated Arwen.

"His Majesty also dampened a towel and wiped your Highness's sweat off," Adelia said with a slight snort. I could only frown as I heard it. How did the king feel after he had lost his lifelong companion? The words I had heard amid my confused fever

dreams have become caught in my heart.

“I will go to his Majesty.”

I immediately located the king. I had thought he would be wracked by heartache for the loss of his wife, but he was not in his bed; he was in the conference room of the citadel.

“You are in a better shape,” the king greeted me, his face pale. Unlike his hazy white hair, his eyes shone clearer than ever.

“When this blizzard ends, I will be away from the citadel for a while. I will let the Crown Prince do his best to keep the citadel while I am away.”

The same held for his voice: It possessed great clarity.

“What do you mean, leave the citadel?” I asked, frowning at the sudden statement. The king then replied in an embarrassed tone.

“Don’t we have to pay them back in kind?”

CHAPTER 187
THE EMBERS BECOME FIRE AGAIN (3)

The king raised his hand and declared for the meeting to adjourn.

After paying their courtesies to the king and me, the commanders promptly left the conference hall. The palace knight commander also left after a glance from the king.

“It seems that not all Sword Masters are iron men,” the king quietly remarked when only the two of us were left.

“Even if your body has the power to split the sky and overturn the earth, it remains the body of a human being. Do humans not suffer and toil throughout their lives?”

What the king said was unexpected, and he was referencing the fact that I had been moaning in a high fever overnight.

“One thing you must know is that many are watching. Your frivolous acts will lower the morale of the army, and your minor deviances can sway many. You should never again bring worry to others through such reckless behavior as yesterday.”

In the past, I would have jumped up and said that my actions were no care of his. But I didn’t rebel against the king’s words, nor did I respond with anger. I just quietly listened because I knew what anxiety was contained in the king’s lengthy speech. The king continued.

“Do not be proud. Do not be overconfident. Be careful in everything you do and be an example to others. Let the soldiers consider you to be an unbreakable wall. Let them compare your existence with that of a thousand guns.”

The king’s voice echoed through the conference hall, and when he stopped speaking, he looked at me.

“I couldn’t manage it. But you can,” he said as a moment of self-recrimination passed through his wrinkled eyes.

“Sire,” said I, “the soldiers of the citadel already consider your Majesty like a wall, like a legion-“

“Stop saying such things. Wasn’t it you who have accused me, to my face, of being incompetent and narrow-minded?”

I had wanted to comfort the king, but he brought up our old exchange with a grin. I had truly thought him to be so at that time. I had thought that he was a man lying to himself, who stuck to his throne as if it was a comfy seat. I only learned the truth later as I started to understand the king’s situation, but that didn’t mean what I said to him had been forgotten.

“Then…” I tried to say, but I closed my mouth as I looked at the table. Words were not enough.

“Raise your head. I’m not trying to blame you,” said the king, and it was clear that he had not referred to the past to rebuke me. He rather blamed himself, saying that the fault lay with him and his foolishness.

“I did not see the nobles’ respect for the royal family rolling into the ditch – because of my darkened eyes. My shuttered ears did not hear the people suffer under the tyranny of the nobles. I did not hear the voices of resentment raised against the monarch.”

That was why only a few loyalists now sympathized with the royal family and cried out for the kingdom’s independence. Most of the nobles have begun to resent the Leonbergers for provoking the Empire into a proclamation of war.

“From the peoples’ perspective, there is no difference between royal and imperial nobles. What is the distinction?”

It was exactly as the king had said. This land had been overflowing with people willing to die fighting for the kingdom four-hundred years ago. They had wished for death rather than being forced to merge under the flag of the Empire. But not now; now the people had grown tired of the exploitation and tyranny of the nobles, and they cared not at all about who the ruler of this land was.

I hated to admit it, but the kingdom’s independence was no longer the will of the entire kingdom. Deep in thought, the king spoke again.

“If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have realized the whole truth. I would have believed that, as long as the Leonberg family stood firm, everything else would fall into place.”

The king’s tone of voice now changed.

“She wasn’t daunted by the struggle. She just chose what was right.”

The king’s voice had subsided to a near-whisper of self-pity and self-chastisement; it now rose up high, as if reaping the words.

“I did not hesitate to decide about something which I believed to be more important than life or death. If she wanted to live, she could’ve. She didn’t choose to.”

The sudden change of voice raised my head as I looked at the king. His face had been dull when I had first entered the hall; his eyes were now shining like never before.

“How could one of Balahard blood, the family said to be the best defenders in the kingdom, not know that she couldn’t protect all the outer walls with the troops garrisoned in the capital? She must have known that if she fell back and locked herself in the palace, she could have survived, held out for a month instead of four or five days.”

As I stared at the king, he quickly spoke on.

“But she didn’t. She didn’t wait for the Templars in the palace. She met her enemy on the outer walls. She did so, knowing she could not win. What do you think is the reason?”

I didn’t answer.

“It is because she wanted to show everyone. She wanted them to know that the royal family is dedicated to their protection, not that the royal family seeks the comforts of the palace while hiding behind the people getting trampled in the outer city.”

The king didn’t want me to answer.

“Because she wanted to show that we are a true royal family who regards the people as our lifeblood and will protect them with our lives.”

Little by little, the king’s breathing grew rougher.

“She did not want to leave the capital and the people to the ravages of a war that the royal family began.”

The king took a breath.

“Because she wanted to give something back to them,” the king said and continued to speak quietly. “She devoted her life, hoping that the weakly burning embers on the walls of the capital would come to burn beyond the city’s walls.”

The cold voice of the king was thin, drawn out.

“So that the embers may spread throughout the kingdom and rise like wildfires.”

The king kept talking. He spoke of the brutality of the Empire that raided the capital. He wondered about how the queen fought and what end she faced. He went on to say that no strangers would lurk in the kingdom.

“Someone may point at the death of my companion, my wife, and say I use it as propaganda. Some may also close their ears, saying that the tales of her valor are false.”

Only then did I see the heat that had risen within the king’s eyes.

“But I will ensure that no place will be beyond the reach of the fire she ignited at the cost of her life.”

It was an aspiration, a determination.

“If the embers are weak, I will also become an ember.”

It was grief, anger, and madness.

“That is the mission she has left for me.”

The moment that I identified the source of the heat in his eyes, my heart began to throb.

I had seen countless people with the same eyes as he, and I knew what path they walked, where they were headed. I couldn’t listen to it anymore and said, “Why do you want to add to the fire by burning only Leonberg’s people? If you command me, I

will burn imperial fortresses, light them up as beacons of retribution."

I asked the king, begged him, to reconsider. He grinned at me.

"Are you worried about something going wrong with me?"

I felt a feeling of love that I could not express, could not tell him about. So, I became even more anxious. I asked him again and again to change his mind. In the end, I was finally able to make him say that he would think about it. My efforts proved futile.

One evening, forty-five days later, before the king had finished his contemplations, a bad blizzard that had raged gradually started to subside. A half-elf trudged to the citadel through the thick snow. It was the black-haired Gionne, one of the five surviving swords-elves who had been left in the capital as both the queen's escort and Montpellier's surveillance.

Her left arm was completely severed, and her torn and crushed body had turned blue under the bite of the blizzard.

"Gionne?"

"Aah." Even in that state, the half-elf smiled brightly when I called her name. I ran straight out to her. Gionne started stumbling before I got to her, falling down. I quickly reached out to support her so that she would not roll over into the frigid snow.

Her one half being in my arms, she waved her remaining hand and gestured eagerly. I couldn't understand her sign language. I just stared at her hand blankly, unable to glean any meaning from her extraordinarily long and pale fingers and their movement.

Gionne realized that her sign language was ineffectual, so she quietly put her hand in mine and pulled my hand until it touched her waist. I looked down and saw the rope tied around her, the rope having scuffed into her bruised blue flesh. I almost loosened the rope when I noticed how taught it was and that it was tied to something. I shifted my eyes along the length of the rope, finally seeing what lay at its end. Something was wrapped in cloth, a cloth that had once been luxurious and clean but had now become soiled by Gionne's journey.

I looked at the half-elf, seeing her lips move.

It was difficult to understand what she was trying to say as she forced movement into the frozen muscles of her mouth. Gionne patiently spoke again and again until I was able to understand what she was saying.

“Your mother.”

I stiffened, and my neck creaked as I once more looked at the object wrapped in dirtied cloth.

My heart constricted as I forced myself to reach out and unwrap the frozen material. Skin, frozen blue, appeared, and then I saw the entire twisted body. The head had been stitched to the torso, a patchy stitch of poor skill. It was certainly the body of a woman I knew, even if it was damaged near beyond recognition.

“Ah…” someone groaned from behind me. As I turned my head, I desperately hoped that the moan had not been the king’s. My expectations were dashed; the king was looking at me like a man without a mind, his face bleached white.

“Huh… Your Majesty.”

I hastily covered the corpse as I shuffled in between it and the king.

‘Tschk~ Tschk~’ the king staggered, stumbled, crying, “Get out of my way.”

His desperate hand pushed me, and I could not resist his helpless gesture, allowing him to push me aside. The king fell to his knees.

“Alas…”

He reached out, gripping the frozen body’s hands. The king brought his mouth to the hands, kissing them, blowing breath upon them. However, the solidly frozen hands did not open, and their former warmth did not return. The king knelt there for a long time, tracing his fingers over the body’s cheek.

“Agh,” a groan escaped from the monarch’s lips. “Waah.”

The king had been cheek to frozen cheek with the stiff remains; he now clutched the body tightly.

“Aahhh,” he wailed like a wounded beast. “Ahhhh.”

The king cried as he hugged the queen's corpse. I could see no more of it and turned my head away, holding a wounded half-elf in my arms, feeling as her breath slowly faded away.

"Good job, Gionne."

The poor half-elf, who had run from the capital without rest, smiled brightly at me and promptly died in my arms. Gionne, one of the poor women who had survived Sigrun's slaughter. Five of them had lived, and I had pledged that they could live without hardship. Now, Gionne had passed away.

I closed my eyes tightly.

The sound of the wind intensified. The king's screams so clearly penetrated into my ears through the raging storm, however. A long time after that, the dead half-elf's body was taken away, but I still couldn't leave. I stood by the king as he held onto the queen's body in silence.

The sound of his weeping was heard no more, now the king was whimpering, whispering to the queen's corpse, allowing no one to come near him.

Then, the king stood up, and our eyes met. His eyes were empty as if his soul had escaped him.

My heart slumped in my breast, and I hurried to the king.

"I have to find clean clothes," he said. "I can't hold a funeral looking like this."

Contrary to his earlier sorrow, the king's voice was quiet yet firm, and the steps he took toward the citadel were unshakable. This appearance remained unchanged in him, even during the funeral on the following day. The king carried out all the procedures consistently and with an indomitable will.

He dug into the frozen ground while a blizzard raged and laid the queen's coffin to rest inside the deep grave. Gionne, who had brought the queen's body to the citadel, was also buried.

"The day that the kingdom stands right and proud, she will be reburied in the citadel," the king said. After the earth had covered the two coffins, the king, dressed in black robes, had quietly walked to the highest point of the wall. He stood there as

he looked down upon the soldiers, his eyes sunken.

“Are you sad?” the monarch asked after a while, his voice echoing through the wind and across the citadel.

“I am also sad. But now is not the time for sorrow. Now is the time to be angry.”

The king’s voice was now settling into a fierce cadence.

“Then- Where should that anger go!”

“The Empire!” the soldiers shouted, their response as one.

“What is the price they have to pay!”

“Blood for blood! Death for death!”

As the shouts rang out, the raging blizzard slowly began to subside – and it finally stopped.

In other words, the king had decided to turn the land of the Empire into a sea of blood, to kill all the imperials and mount their heads on stakes. He declared that every castle raised by imperial hands would be burned, and nothing built in the Empire would be left standing.

“Death to the imperials!”

“Curse the land of the wicked!”

The legion commanders and knights had held back their emotions; they now cried out in anger and grief. Even the most prudent commanders exclaimed that vengeance had to be enacted in the name of the queen. I looked at the sky, now so clear, as if there had been no storm.

There was no longer anything preventing the king from advancing.

* * *

King Lionel Leonberger gave an order of total mobilization.

All of the kingdom's champions headed to the border citadel, and the nobles led their conscripts and troops there as well. The eastern fleet began sailing southward through the frozen sea, and the elite legions of the west marched to the Gifted Lion Citadel. All Leonberg's knights flocked to the border, including the Templars and their troops, who had recaptured the capital.

It was the moment when the true war began.

CHAPTER 188
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (1)

Some of the Knights of the Sky returned to the citadel shortly after the funeral, those who had left to help recapture the capital. I heard the detailed circumstances of events through them.

When the Templar Knights arrived at the capital, the enemies had already taken full control of the outer walls and were preparing to defend them. The knight reported that the Templars had believed breaking through the enemy's defense would not be easy, so they prepared themselves for an extended siege. However, the imperials collapsed, unable to defend the walls when an unexpected internal rebellion fell upon them. It was the citizens of the capital who rose up and attacked, with great violence, the gates occupied by the Imperial Army.

The militias were, of course, poorly equipped and severely lacked proper training, so they could not recapture the gates when faced by elite soldiers and imperial knights, the pillars of command.

The Templars did not fail to notice the confusion caused by the citizens, however. York Willowden, a champion of the kingdom and leader of the Templar Knights, led the offensive and forced all four gates of the city open. The imperials had endured the onslaught upon the walls in desperation, but they eventually abandoned the defense and occupied the outer city instead, trying to resist. Their efforts were once more suppressed thanks to the resistance and assistance of the citizens.

It was only later revealed that the civil resistance had been sprung by virtue of efforts made by those commanders and knights who had left the capital. However, even if the imperials had been prepared for the populace's uprising, it would not have occurred had the queen's death not spurred the citizens into action.

As the Wyvern Knight's report continued, all the knights and commanders in the citadel mourned the queen's death. Still, the king had ordered them to foster anger in their hearts instead of grief, so they swallowed their sorrow and became determined for war. The Wyvern Knight then told of how the queen had fought and held the walls until the very end, basing his report on the testimony of the capital's citizens. He also

told us what lengths the imperial army went to dishonor her.

The imperial forces found the queen's body and desecrated it. It was not enough for them to mount her head and body on different places upon the wall, so they framed her death as that of a cowardly fugitive, fabricating the details of her end. However, too many people had witnessed the queen's resistance upon the wall and her final act. One of the citizens told the Sky Knight that a righteous man had come out and fought the imperials to recover the queen's corpse, then fled.

The moment I heard mention of this 'righteous man' I knew who it was.

I must have been Gionne, who brought the queen's body to the citadel, despite the half-elf missing an arm and with her body full of severe injuries. The image of Gionne ran clear in my mind, with her struggling alone against the Imperial Army. Her demise, quietly breathing in my arms, was drawn so vivid in my memory.

I kept my breathing stable as I tried to dispel the heat boiling inside of me.

Meanwhile, the tale of the Sky Knight ended.

The king commended the knight for his hard work of delivering the news without reluctance by traveling vast distances across the country. The king's voice sounded dull, without a hint of agitation. When the Sky Knight left, the king instructed that all the details be written down and remembered and be spread through the entire kingdom. He also wrote a letter urging all the kingdom's nobles to participate in the war.

It was an order of total mobilization.

The king's horsemen became the heralds, riding from the citadel.

Soon thereafter, the entire kingdom was on the move. Resentful nobles cried out for revenge after hearing about events in the capital, and the sound of knights and swordsmen sharpening their swords rang out after they heard of the queen's end and began heading to the Gifted Lion Citadel.

Shortly after the king issued the order, nobles near the border led their troops and conscripts to the citadel. Through them, I learned that the other lords were also in a hurry to gather their troops and march here. From the rear came the news that the Great Marshal was arming citizens, tens of thousands of voluntary enlistees who he

was struggling to organize and mobilize.

Most of them were citizens of the royal capital who had witnessed the queen's last stand. As the king had said, it seemed that the queen's death had become a fire that spread throughout the kingdom. It was clear that the change was not only occurring to the nobles and the capital's citizens but the general populace as well. The number of civilians began to increase in the citadel, all of them people from the villages and estates adjacent to the border. Most of them lacked the courage to enter battle with spear and sword, but they wished to aid the war effort in their own way.

"This… It's all I have, but the soldiers can eat it when they march out," said a middle-aged man as he brought a basket full of grain and food that he had saved especially for the winter.

"I can't do much, but I'm good at chores. If you need a laborer, I will work hard."

A few young men had come to the citadel, saying that they were workers and would help with the general labor.

"I have become a big and old aunt, m'lord. But in all my time, the peasants in the nearby villages always come to me to get fixed up. I can't just sit back and watch these men who fight for me die with broken heads and torn flesh, right? So, I lagged behind them peasants who came here, knowing that it's difficult to care for one that's got his hand injured."

One talkative woman made it her duty to care for the injured in the citadel, saying that it was routine for her to take care of villagers who injured themselves.

The atmosphere at the citadel had been tense, up to a bursting point, that tension was now slightly diluted by the presence of good-hearted common folk.

The knights and soldiers were still crying out for bloody vengeance, but they became very thoughtful when they saw the civilians. Besides the independence of Leonberg that the royal family cried out for, these warriors seemed to become aware of the existence of the people they were meant to protect.

And while the knights and soldiers became cognizant of this new sense of duty, civilians continued to flock to the citadel. Not all of them came to help the soldiers; rather, the vast majority came up to the citadel to say a few words.

“I saw a group of people out there on the plains, m’lord. They looked real suspicious.”

Some hunters had roamed the plains for prey when they found tracks they had never seen before.

“The words and behavior of that one man who settled in our village a while ago… It ain’t like that of us Leonberg folk.”

Most of the stories that flowed from their mouths were nothing but groundless superstitions that sprang up in the clutter of war. Some of the reports were too detailed and consistent to be mere rumors, however. They had to be checked.

The king sent out the citadel’s cavalry, ordering them to trace and track the rumors of the people. The result was surprising, as a number of spies were flushed out, so close to the king and the border guard. A hundred spies resisted and were killed on the spot, while the number of those captured while fleeing reached ten.

The commanders in the citadel were amazed, for they had not imagined that imperial spies would be operating so openly.

I wasn’t surprised at all. It had been just a while ago when the nobles were executed, those nobles who should have been the eyes of the kingdom but chose to serve the Empire. It would have been strange if there existed no gaps in Leonberg’s information network. Of course, the royal family had swiftly dispatched officials to take over the traitors’ estates, but it requires time to grasp the true nature of the estates in detail and to manage them as efficiently as the nobles who had ruled there for generations. Moreover, the aftermath of the corrupt acts committed by the turncoats was too great for a quick fix.

The populace had grown tired of exploitation and abuse, so they were hostile to the new officials and even the royal family and became very uncooperative. Even if imperial secretaries spoke the imperial language in broad daylight in the middle of these estates, it would not be strange at all if no one reported this to the authorities.

In fact, legions of the Imperial Army had lived in hiding in Leonberg’s lands for years without the kingdom being aware of their existence.

It would have never happened if the nobles had properly done their duty toward the royal family and if the family had not lost the trust of the people.

But what could I do? Things have already transpired, and that which is done cannot be undone.

Now, I was merely grateful for the small, positive changes brought about by the queen's death. If it weren't for her acts, the people would never have come to the citadel to share their rumors.

Some time passed, despite the fact that the king cried out for revenge and proclaimed the total mobilization order. It had seemed that the Royal Army would advance upon the Empire at once, but it stationed itself at the border, not crossing that line. Everyone knew, though, that such a stasis would not last forever. The kingdom was just catching its breath.

Time was needed to form the nobles and their soldiers who arrived late at the citadel into a single corps, and time was needed for the inexperienced Eastern and Western Legions to become war-ready.

I was just waiting.

About a month and forty-five days had passed after the queen's funeral, and it was around that time that the champions of the kingdom had all assembled in the citadel. The kingdom had taken its breath.

"I would like you to hold the border."

In stark contrast to the king's call for bloody vengeance in front of the soldiers, he left me with only that short request. There were so many things I wanted to say to him, but the only words that escaped my lips was a greeting of good luck. The king smiled gently at me and patted my shoulders. He then left the citadel in silence.

Many troops of the Central Army and nobles had finally been formed into a single force, and they would board the Eastern Fleet with the king and sail to the front lines. The Wyvern Knights of Dotrin, who had been spread through the kingdom as messengers, followed the fleet.

Doris had remained in the citadel, and he comforted me as I watched my comrades leave.

"Don't worry too much. I will be with his Majesty – and don't worry about me. All the Knights of the Sky will be rushing in against the Empire. It's a real monster."

“I know it’s a monster.”

“Do not think too much about it, and don’t worry.”

When the Wyvern Knights who came late arrived, Doris left with them. And it was a few days after everyone had left for imperial lands when the imperial troops launched a massive offensive against the citadel, struggling through the great cold.

I led the soldiers remaining in the citadel and defeated the imperial forces, again and again.

Whenever I woke up, I grabbed my sword and climbed to the wall, cutting down any foe I saw. Once the enemy’s offensive began slowing, I immediately opened the gates and marched to the border. We destroyed the fortress at the forefront of the Empire, located a day and a half away from the Gifted Lion Citadel, and annihilated several legions.

Upon my return to the citadel, I reorganized the additional troops of Leonberg that arrived and deployed them all along the border. Arwen was entrusted with two legions and the Silver Fox as well as Templar Knights, and she marched to the eastern border. Two legions, as well the Dawn Knights and Blizzard Knights, were sent to guard the western border under the command of Bernardo Eli.

The battlefield was no longer restricted to the Gifted Lion Citadel, with sporadic battles being fought all along the border.

The Masters and I guarded the front without retreating a single step, and I became so busy that I forgot to sleep at night. It was a hectic time, and meals were rarely eaten on schedule.

At some point, I went out to study the prisoners of war. One of them caught my notice, a lieutenant who served as an aide to a young legion commander. His attitude was consistently relaxed despite his captivity, and the sharp energy I felt flowing from him was hidden, kept secret, and lean.

“Hoh,” I exclaimed. He could have been a paladin, and if he was, he would’ve steamed and eaten the imperial paladins with his level of skill. I was not familiar with him, and while I searched my memories, I suddenly checked his status screen.

The information floated clear above his head, and tears flowed from my eyes. When

my ancient friend wasn't a king yet, when he was called the Northern Lion, a visitor came to him, a hybrid who was neither wizard nor knight. My memory flashed.

The Mana Chain: Basic Theory written by Burno Bourdof, eighth successor of Werner Rachel, the sixteenth disciple of Ernest Altringen, founder of the mana chain; compiled by Gregory Hessler.

It was only later that I noticed the name 'Altringen' written upon the book my uncle had handed me, and it was then that I learned that the hybrid of times past had been the founder of mana rings, the technique which had pushed mana hearts aside.

And the young paladin before me was named Altringen.

"Are you a descendant of the Altringen family?" I asked him, and his permanently joyous face hardened into stone. An explosive spike of energy flared from his body.

I smiled as I quietly looked at him, completely baring my own spirit and energy. The descendant of the Altringen family stared at me with curious eyes as he resisted my force, his face stern.

But it was useless. The guy had resisted me up to a point but eventually stepped back as he began retching blood, just like his ancestor did so long ago.

"It's the first time I see Percival beaten back with energy alone," a quiet voice spoke from next to me. It belonged to the young legion commander. I twisted my head as I looked at him, saw him staring at me. His expression annoyed me. I had heard that he was a commander who had surrendered without fighting properly, yet he looked at me as if I was an interesting oddity. The way his mouth stretched expressed a feeling of peculiar ridicule.

He was my prisoner, and yet the superiority and scorn in his eyes bothered me. This came at a time when my heart was as sharp as a sword after repeated battles against the Imperial Army, at a time when my nerves were on edge due to my concern about the king and the army that sailed with him. At another time, I would have pulled back my fist and punched him through the face, but I couldn't, not now.

I had activated the power of [Judging] to confirm the descendant of the Altringen family, and that was all that was important now: The presence of the hybrid's scion, not the blatant expression of disrespect by the legion commander. Here was a gem, and none recognized its worth.

“Oh my… Such a precious thing in such a shabby place.”

The phrase ‘He who picks it up, owns it’ was probably the best one to use in this case.

CHAPTER 189
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (2)

The young legion commander stepped back. I fixed my attention on him, the information listed above his head catching my eye: Malcoy de Marseille, 34 years old. He was the last member of the royal family of the ruined Kingdom of Marseille, a talented person whose physical ability was only on the level of an ordinary knight. However, his aptitude and talent as a commander, his grasp of strategy, tactics, and leadership, was enough to entrust tens of thousands of troops to his command.

The more I looked at him, the more I appreciated just how talented he was. Leonberg had many talented knights, yet there was no great commander to lead them. The Marquis of Bielefeld was currently serving as marshal, but he was not enough. I had to admit that the old man had excellent qualities. However, his ability came from all his years spent as a nobleman and from his experience as an administrator, rather than his military talents.

Vincent was a fitting commander, but he was stuck in Winter Castle. The kingdom's knights and nobles were placed at high levels of command already, but now a person who could handle Leonberg's military has appeared before me. It would be very weird if I did not covet his great ability to command. And better still was the fact that the young legion commander before me seemed to have no loyalty toward the Empire. Rather, there was hatred, and I wondered why such a man served as an imperial commander.

Once his justifications and needs became clear to me, convincing him to join our side would be possible. I immediately proposed to him that he be inducted into the Royal Army's command, promising him that he would be treated reasonably.

"No," said Malcoy de Marseille, refusing my offer with a single word.

* * *

Malcoy was forced to watch the fall of his motherland at the age of thirteen, spending fifteen years in captivity before meeting the second princeps at the age of twenty-eight.

The life of being a prisoner was nothing new to him. Of course, that didn't mean that it wasn't hard on his body. After surrendering to Leonberg, he was not incarcerated in the lap of luxury. At least when he was a prisoner of the Empire, he had been treated quite hospitably, enjoying a measure of freedom, living a life as luxurious as that of any noble.

Life as a prisoner of the Leonberg Kingdom was far different, not hospitable at all. The meals were served only once a day, poor meals. There was no hope of escape from the prison cell, and the sun shone only through a narrow slit in the wall.

He was cold and hungry, and there was no comfort to be had. Nevertheless, Malcoy felt that it wasn't so bad. At least here, nobody looked at him as if he was an animal in a cage. And as part of the victor's spoils, he was not forced against his will to attend banquets in praise of the victor's cause and lands. In that sense, at least, life in the kingdom was comfortable.

His only concern was for the low-ranking soldiers and whether they were being treated worse than the officers. Lieutenant Percival clucked his tongue and asked Malcoy if it was truly the time to be worrying about others.

"The atmosphere of this fortress is unusual. They are all very sharp and eager. It looks like the Empire has done something to upset Leonberg. They can barely keep their anger in check against us," said Percival, and he spoke true.

Malcoy had learned through the knight guarding them that the Imperial Army had raided Leonberg's capital. Many people died in the process, and the queen was sacrificed. It was as the lieutenant said: This was not the time to be worrying about others. If the kingdom is outraged, then commanders like Malcoy himself would be executed first.

Yet, the kingdom's people did nothing to him.

"We knights of Leonberg are not heartless enough to take our anger out on prisoners," the knight said as he noticed their inner emotions, and he said so with an unhappy face. Just when Malcoy was about to sigh in relief, the knight added an ominous caveat.

"I don't know whether the prince feels the same way, though."

And after a while, Leonberg's Crown Prince came to the prison.

I'm not going to be rude, Malcoy vowed.

As he kept that in mind, the Crown Prince suddenly mentioned the Altringen family. Even within the legion, only Malcoy had known of the lieutenant's family. Percival looked as if he wished to burn the prince to ash at once, but the flame raised by him was quickly smothered by the frost-like cold unleashed by the prince.

It was amazing.

Malcoy knew his lieutenant had the skill to defeat even imperial paladins if he put his mind to it. However, given his position as an officer, Percival had never taken the opportunity to show his strength. And now the lieutenant had vomited blood without even drawing a blade. Something even more surprising happened next.

Malcoy had thought the prince was angry. Instead, the man suggested a change. And it wasn't just an offer, but a promise that Malcoy would become a legion commander. It was an unconventional proposal. Even the Empire had only granted Malcoy such a position after scrutinizing him for fifteen years. He couldn't understand why the prince of a small kingdom so readily trusted him, offering him the command of a legion.

Still, Malcoy didn't want to return to the horrors of the battlefield just to solve the puzzle.

"No."

He immediately rejected the prince's offer. It was from that day on that Leonberg's prince started visiting the jail from time to time. He even tried to conquer Malcoy's will by furnishing breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At times he promised to improve the prisoners' treatment. He made unconventional proposals at other times, saying that it would be impossible for the prisoners to be freed without proper dedication.

Malcoy was shaken; he was willing to endure prison life on his own, but he did not want others to suffer because of his stubbornness.

"If you're reluctant to swear allegiance to Leonberg right now, at least give me some counsel and advice from the pit you find yourself in," urged the prince.

"Why the hell do you believe in me so much to make such an offer?" challenged Malcoy. "What if my advice harms your country?"

“That’s a concern.”

“Will my cooperation really improve the treatment of the other prisoners of war?”

“Under the circumstances, I can’t offer them wine and meat at every meal, but I promise that they will at least be better off.”

Malcoy had repeatedly pondered the prince’s proposal and eventually decided to accept it. He was released from prison on that very day, and the Crown prince freed his lieutenant as well.

“I didn’t know that I would be released,” Percival said in a quaint manner, having thought that he would not be freed due to his paladin-like nature. The prince had even returned Percival’s weapons to him.

“Why would he do this?” Malcoy asked.

“Well, if I set my mind to it, I could get some swords and armor anyway, right?”

The logic of it was absurd, yet still true. The citadel was chock-full of weapons, and Percival could get to them at any time, even if they were under guard.

“You know what?” Percival mused.

“What?” asked Malcoy.

“I’m gradually starting to like this prince of Leonberg.”

It was an embarrassing thing to hear for Malcoy, and Percival noticed the effect his spectacular words had.

“Are you jealous? Do not worry. Your wishes are always my top priority, Malcoy,” the lieutenant said with a smirk, adding, “I reckon, since you can’t fight under the banners of your own country anyway, it would be okay to stand under Leonberg’s flag instead of the Empire’s. And you don’t have to fight a hundred battles to gain your command, like in the Empire.”

When Percival asked if a snake’s head would be better than a dragon’s tail, Malcoy laughed.

“Even if that corrupted dragon chews the head off of the fierce snake and eats it?” he retorted.

“If you look at the atmosphere in this fortress, I don’t think the dragon will have an easy time of it,” Percival noted.

“So, you’re asking me to actively help Leonberg instead of just advising them?”

“Well, the Crown Prince did recruit you, so I think he will treat us well. In many ways, he is better than the Empire.”

“I think you better stop. I’m starting to get confused. Are you my officer, or are you the Crown Prince’s acolyte, sent to convert me?”

“It goes without saying that I am Malcoy’s servant.”

Malcoy shook his head as he watched the giggling lieutenant. He had no intention to respond to Percival’s suggestion, as the lieutenant was anxious to push his commander onto the battlefield and into war. Malcoy shut his mouth and began observing the soldiers and knights in the fortress.

In the days after he had been released from prison, there were several attacks by the Imperial Army. Many of the kingdom’s men were injured, even more of them fatigued.

It was both familiar and unfamiliar to Malcoy. The images of the wounded Leonberg and its soldiers and knights overlapped with those of Malcoy’s now-ruined motherland. The Marseille Kingdom had also suffered from an imperial offensive, and Malcoy still clearly remembered the events, now decades past.

A sense of defeat ran rampant through Marseille’s border fortresses. Malcoy remembers the day well: He, the little prince, was clutching his father’s hand. The soldiers and knights gripped their swords and spears, their faces full of fatigue, and deeper still, despair and fear.

Even at that young age, Malcoy had expected his country’s defeat when he looked at the warriors’ faces. The Leonberg Royal Army was different.

The heavy fatigue was the same, yet the emotion filling those faces was not fear or despair but a burning desire. None of these soldiers were afraid of the Empire; none

of them were thinking about Leonberg being defeated. Was it a group madness? Or perhaps the villagers and peasants of the north are unaware of the Empire's might? As Malcoy thought about it, he knew that it wasn't one of those factors.

Even if this was a border fortress, all here had still suffered the shame of their country's capital falling. It had been but a short while since Leonberg's queen was lost to the Empire. It was no exaggeration to say that their national pride and anger had reached a point where it expressed itself as a great wind battering against the waves of the imperial forces across the border.

These men also knew it; that is why they were so desperate to endure: Because they know that if they fall, the kingdom falls. And still, with that knowledge in mind, the soldiers were not afraid. They never let go of their swords, even when their stomachs were torn open and their chests pierced. They would grab onto an enemy soldier, stick him with a knife, and throw both themselves and their foe from the walls.

"Leonberg lives forever!"

"Long live the Leonberger royal family!"

They cried out for the prosperity of their kingdom and the well-being of the royal family.

Malcoy noticed that there were some exceptionally shabby and poorly-armed soldiers among them. The moment he saw them, he knew: They were conscripts, not regular soldiers.

"Long live Queen Margarita!"

"Long live the Leonberger royal family!"

Yet even these royal conscripts, forcibly pulled into the war, shouted the names of the queen and her family.

What is so different? What is the difference between my perished motherland and their country?

No matter how much Malcoy thought about it, he couldn't gain understanding.

It was from the mouth of Lieutenant Percival that Malcoy learned of the queen's end, and yet the answer became no clearer.

"Have you heard how the queen of the Leonberg kingdom died? She refused to flee, remaining on the wall until the end to protect the people of their outer city. I hear their king has never left the frontline this entire war and that he fought his enemies like a knight, sword in hand as he battled on these walls. I hear even Leonberg's more gentile nobles are fighting at the forefront."

"All their nobles are fighting on the front line?" Malcoy asked.

"Well, not all of them voluntarily so. In fact, some rumors say that the Crown Prince has issued a stern threat to all deserters, to all who would leave the front line. I am curious if his threat actually works."

It all sounded very unconvincing to Malcoy, who was familiar with the nature of the nobility. The nobles of his motherland had immediately changed flags, becoming imperial nobles when Marseille faced great jeopardy. And now, the lands of the old Marseille Kingdom were just another imperial province. The Imperial Army had slain countless people. Yet, the traitor nobles even now lived in extravagance, living while the members of the royal family they had served were miserably slaughtered, with the few survivors dragged off liked chained dogs.

All that changed for the nobles was the name of the liege and the country they served.

And that was the nobility – soldiers were no very different either.

When the palace was besieged, the knights and the soldiers had turned the tips of their swords the other way. It was they who had decapitated the royals and loyalists who had held out to the end, the traitors then dedicating the heads to the Imperial Army.

No… Malcoy held no desire to blame them all over again. They had done what they did to survive; because it was a war. Malcoy was sick of it. No matter how grandiose and noble the cause, the nature of war does not change. Attack and defend, kill and die – all that remains is the victor and the defeated. And nothing is more important than survival. Compared to living, the rise and fall of a country, loyalty and honor, and the cause of others are not worth pennies.

Malcoy had lived his life with that faith in his heart, at least until he came to this cold and desolate realm.

“You hate to admit it, Malcoy, but you don’t hate war,” the lieutenant said as he looked into his commander’s sunken eyes.

“Shut up, Percival. What do you know? I saw the beginning and end of the war-”

“What Malcoy-nim really hates is not war… It’s humans.”

Malcoy stiffened at the unexpected statement.

“No… I should rather say distrust, instead of hate,” Percival added.

“Shut up. If you open your mouth again-”

“Should you not admit it?”

“I said I would not stand it!” Malcoy cried as he drew his sword, its point aimed at Percival. Percival snorted and pushed the blade aside.

“Don’t be silly. Whenever you talk about how and what war is like, I feel like I – and everyone who came here believing in you – is stupid. It’s very upsetting.”

“Percival!”

“Look here, Malcoy de Marseille. Is their war the same as the ugly war you always talk about?”

The lieutenant grabbed Malcoy’s chin, and forcibly turned his head. Malcoy saw nurses taking care of the wounded soldiers, and children too young to wield spears and swords were carrying stones and bushels of arrows, their small hands toughened by labor.

“Let’s say, as you always say, that they are also participants in the war. That they are just war’s ugly aspects.”

Malcoy couldn’t say that; he could say nothing.

A long time passed, and Percival finally released his grip on Malcoy’s chin.

“I’m sorry for the disrespectful act. Honestly, after I said what I wanted to say, I feel cool inside. I will accept my punishment. Please, don’t kill me, though,” the lieutenant pleaded for his affront to be forgiven as he stepped back and knelt – with a face that didn’t reflect his spoken regret.

Malcoy had felt like punishing his lieutenant a while ago, but now he didn’t like the way he was feeling at all. His head was confused, complicated; the scene of the fortress had disturbed him. Percival’s voice had become entangled in his mind, his now-disorganized mind. His skills of thought and rational insight was of no help to him at the moment.

As he stood there – his mind gripped by confusion – he heard the urgent sounding of a trumpet.

‘Shk,’ and in the next instant came the sound of someone coming to a halt behind him. Malcoy turned his head and looked into the Crown Prince’s face.

“It is such a nice day, so I decided to get some sun for a while,” the prince said in a natural tone as he gestured across the roofs of the citadel. Malcoy frowned. He wasn’t in a good mood because of Percival, and he wasn’t in the mood for useless chatter.

“How are you? Come to look if you can see the Imperial Army on this fine day?” Percival greeted the prince in a friendly tone.

“Is that what it looks like? If a man finishes his work, he can enjoy some rest,” the prince accepted the lieutenant’s greeting in a familiar manner.

Only then did Malcoy realize how Percival knew of the situation of Leonberg in such detail. Moreover, Malcoy suspected that the lieutenant might have known that the Crown Prince was present from the beginning.

“Well, if you’re busy, I am also busy,” the prince said as he took a step back and paused. “Ah. It wasn’t intentional, but I overheard you. I’ll just add a word,” the prince said to Malcoy. “People like you, who try to judge everything with their heads, find only reasons and questions. Even if they live long lives, they don’t realize what real war is.”

“I think, at least, I know war better than your Highness,” stated Malcoy.

The prince laughed in blatant ridicule.

“You really think so?”

Malcoy didn’t dare answer; he didn’t feel the need to answer.

“Then come along,” said the prince, his voice neutral. “I will show you what is different between the war you witnessed from the outside and a war you go through in person.”

Without awaiting an answer, the Crown Prince strode away.

Malcoy shot his lieutenant a fierce glance before following the prince.

CHAPTER 190
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (3)

As Malcoy followed in the prince's footsteps, he recalled a conversation he had with Percival some time ago.

"This may hurt your pride," Percival had said, "but if we fight, we lose. Even if there were two of me, I am not confident that we would win."

"Is he that strong?"

"It's just a guess, but I think only the Emperor could deal with such a monster."

Percival had vomited blood into a bowl after his clash of energy against the prince; his face had looked exhausted when he had called the Crown Prince a monster. He then went on to say that to properly deal with the prince, no less than the emperor's personal guards would have to be deployed.

If Percival's statement was not an exaggeration, then the Crown Prince was a rare genius, a true genius unique to his age whose talent has already blossomed. Malcoy was not sure, but the prince must have practiced with the sword night and day and likely also possessed practical experience on par with his skill.

And this prince had now arrogantly said that he would show Malcoy the reality of war. Even if Malcoy did acknowledge the prince's amazing genius and might, he could not find it in himself to respect the prince's experience. The man had only recently passed the age of twenty, after all!

And in that life, he spent only a few years at war in the north, and a few months warring against the Empire. He was over-eager to talk about 'real war' with such scant experience.

Malcoy had seen far more than him, gone through numerous battles, and witnessed the fall of his motherland. He had even participated in the invasion of the Dotrin Kingdom while following the now-deceased second princeps.

Malcoy didn't have to wish to see a real war: It was a haunted pit, and he knew it. Still, his current reality was no different from that of a prisoner. Were it not so; he would have laughed at the young prince.

Malcoy knew he couldn't, as the treatment of the other prisoners depended on the whims of the Crown Prince. There was no need for Malcoy to make things more troublesome for his soldiers by being arrogant. So he hid his emotions as he followed the prince, making sure his face was constantly without expression.

"If you don't want to die an accidental death by being mistaken for the enemy, change your clothes," the prince said as he handed Malcoy a Royal Leonberg Army uniform and then continued to walk along the wall. Malcoy noted how, despite the light emotion the prince showed on his face, that face was truly dark.

Reluctantly, Malcoy looked around, pretending to be interested.

Soldiers gripped their swords and spears as they stared out across the walls, and the archers lined up along the battlements were awaiting orders, their bows hanging slack. Behind Malcoy, those who appeared to be commanders kicked the soldiers' asses as they shouted out orders.

"…!"

"…!"

The language of the Leonberg Kingdom was unfamiliar to Malcoy, but it was not difficult to roughly guess what the commanders were saying.

"Stand up straight, you idiots! Step up!"

The soldiers stepped up, following the order raptly. Those few who didn't get it right were singled out by the commander, forced to do it again and again. Malcoy had judged the meaning of the order correctly, and a sigh escaped from his lips.

He hadn't expected much – the sights revealed to him were more disappointing than his expectations. When it came to showing what real war was, the prince only seemed to want to boast about the high morale of his soldiers. Malcoy sighed again as he looked at the prince, knowing that no matter his own thoughts, the prince was busy doing his job. The Crown Prince called a one-eyed knight and a few men dressed as mountain infantry to him, and the men looked somewhat frivolous as

they were given instructions. After receiving their orders, the knight and the infantry glanced at Malcoy.

And that first glance they gave him was quite remarkable. One of the slender-looking mountain infantrymen even clucked his tongue as he looked at Malcoy. It was by no means a pleasant experience, though Malcoy did not openly express this. His blood was not warm enough for him to be upset by such a trivial matter. Even if their scorn was unpleasant, Malcoy wasn't so indiscreet as to forget his situation and express his displeasure.

He thought so and knew it to be true. The fact that Leonberg's troops looked down on him did not affect Malcoy. However, it was difficult for Malcoy to stand the gaze of the casual-looking mountain infantryman and the twisted manner in which he looked at him.

The man had an annoyed expression as if he had been asked to carry some heavy luggage, as if he had been asked to play the role of babysitter for a child who couldn't properly pee.

Malcoy turned his head away, no longer wanting the infantryman's attitude to affect him. After some time, the one-eyed knight led other knights away as they left. The mountain infantry soon began chatting with each other. Malcoy gave a sigh once he confirmed that their interest was no longer on him.

The prince then came up to him and said, "From here to there. That is where you are to stay until the battle is over."

Malcoy frowned.

"As your guest, you said that a few words of advice are sufficient. Are you thinking of breaking our agreement now?" he demanded. Malcoy had followed the prince to be shown the reality of war; he didn't climb the wall to fight for Leonberg's army.

The prince laughed.

"You're real stubborn," he said. "Good. This time I'll match your beat. You need motivation? If you defend this position until the battle's end, we will release five prisoners. If you're lucky, I can reward you accordingly."

Malcoy eventually decided to accept the prince's proposal, pretending to be won

over. He knew he could not continue to refuse in his current situation, and the favor being the release of five more people made it an irresistible proposal.

“The rewards will go to those serving under you,” the prince said politely, his face arrogant, “so do whatever you want. Oh, and don’t think about getting any help from your lieutenant in this battle. I sent him to the other side of the wall. Maybe you two can meet up when the battle’s done.”

“Why is Percival-”

“I told him that for each imperial knight he kills, I will release two prisoners. He ran to the wall, excited.”

Malcoy sighed.

From the start, the lieutenant had understood him, and he was there when Malcoy had begun to feel worse in recent years. It was uncomfortable to be away from Percival, but Malcoy only felt like this for a while. He soon started to count the number of imperial troops who were gradually narrowing their distance from the walls.

Approximately 1,500 soldiers were in his line of sight. Knowing that the same number of troops was located in each cardinal direction, the total number of imperials was 6,000, three legions.

The troops of Leonberg arrayed against them numbered approximately one legion. Malcoy had counted them over time after his release from prison and knew his numbers were not in error.

The imperial troops outnumbered Leonberg’s three-to-one, but Malcoy knew that the difference could be overcome if full advantage was taken of the defensive position.

Moreover, if the morale of the defenders was great, the citadel could be held without difficulty.

“What the hell is the emperor thinking?”

What were the aims of the Imperial Army? Malcoy did not know why they kept repeating such ineffectual attacks, but he could not think on it for long.

‘Dum~ Dum~ Dum~’

The imperial army’s drummers got closer.

‘Dumtumtum~ Dumtumtum~’

Little by little, the interval between successive drumbeats shortened, and the imperial army’s pace accelerated.

‘Buuwooo!’

A horn was sounded from the citadel in response, and the battle began.

* * *

Malcoy’s mind was calm – until the first assault began.

He was in the position of a knight rather than a legion commander, and he had thought that there was no problem with that.

There was: Battle seen through a commander’s eyes was not the same as that experienced by a single knight. His eyes were dizzied by blades flashing from all sides and by the arrows flying from under the wall. He was deafened by the roar of the sergeant’s orders and the soldiers’ aggression. The smell of feces and blood spilled from the desperate and dying, paralyzing his nose.

It was uncomfortable to breathe due to the haggard breath and heat coming from allies and foes alike. In that chaos, Malcoy fought without cease.

He constantly watched his back and protected himself from anything that might dull or disturb his senses. And as he battled on, the sun set, and the enemy retreated.

Malcoy was utterly exhausted.

In all honesty, he never even noticed the enemies retreating; he had just fought – and then the was battle was over. The assaults continued the next day, and the next.

Malcoy could recover his stamina quicker than after the first battle, but it didn’t last long. His mana ring had been abused through successive battles, and it felt the strain; his reserves were insufficient, and there was no time to fill the depleted ring. The

enemies were endlessly rushing in, and he had no time to ponder his situation.

With Malcoy's mana depleted, he had to fight with only his sword. And when that battle was over, his arms and legs were continuously cramping. The next day was even more terrible.

His physical condition was worse with his mana depleted, and he was forced to endure it, his taut muscles barely able to move. Another day passed another desperate fight. Malcoy sat on the wall, unheeding of his pride as he breathed heavily.

It was a burdensome thought for him, knowing that the next day would come. It was unjust; he resented the hardship and the prospect of dying in a fort that held no meaning to him. As he sat there, he wanted to descend from the wall and be done with the crown prince's challenge.

He suppressed that desire, however. If he held on a bit more, he would be able to free more of his men from the cold prison. Then, Malcoy suddenly looked around himself and noticed the state of Leonberg's army. The warriors had bloody faces, but they were quietly going over their equipment, checking the condition of the walls, and preparing for the next day's battle.

The mountain infantry kept giving Malcoy nasty looks, and they even chatted about whether there was any energy left in him. Malcoy clenched his teeth, vowing not to show weakness in front of knights or even such scruffy soldiers; he pledged this to himself.

But Malcoy didn't know that the people he thought of as common soldiers were in truth elite rangers; that they have been forged in battle against fierce orcs who had rushed at them year after year; that if these men protect a wall, they form the strong backbone of the defense, which would survive for a month, not five days.

Also, there was one thing Malcoy couldn't even imagine: These elite rangers skillfully drove and herded the foe to Malcoy's section of the wall throughout every battle with well-placed shots.

And, of course, it was Prince Adrian who had given them such instructions.

* * *

“Roll as many as you can his way. All you have to do is make sure he survives.”

Jordan and his rangers performed my orders very well, and ten days from the day the siege had begun, Malcoy was already ragged.

“If we lure more enemies to our section, you might as well shove a knife into the bugger and throw him from the wall,” quipped Jordan. “So how about it? Shall we continue?”

I nodded without hesitation. Malcoy’s progress remained lacking.

He was still an unripe strategist who believed that he alone had been through the horrors of war. That only he knew its ugliness. Malcoy had not yet pushed himself far enough to realize the reality.

“It looks like he doesn’t like it very much,” Jordan observed as he stuck his tongue out. It seemed that the ranger was misinterpreting my intentions, thinking that I wished to cure the habits of a cheeky prisoner. Jordan’s view was completely different from my own.

I wasn’t trying to mess with Malcoy.

No, I was merely angry. Malcoy was very similar to my past self. He trembled with his arrogance, believing that his will had transcended death. It was only after I lost my uncle that I knew what it meant to suffer for the death of others. The same held true for Malcoy.

He says he had witnessed the horrors of war as he watched the destruction of his country. It is known that he participated in war while serving an imperial princeps. Malcoy was confident that he knew war better than anyone else.

One of those wars wasn’t his own – I had heard many stories of him from his lieutenant.

How Malcoy lives and how Malcoy thinks. And if everything I heard about him was true, then all the wars Malcoy went through were not his own. The ruin of his motherland that the prince suffered was nothing more than watching others fight while safe in the rear. Even though his family was annihilated in the span of events, and he himself became a prisoner of the Empire, he was only a spectator in that war.

He did not mourn the deaths of the soldiers who had died fighting against the Empire, and he never thought for what and in what mindset the men might have fought. He just took their service for granted while resenting those who had forsaken and betrayed him.

Malcoy hadn't even drawn a knife in that war; he just clung to his father's trousers as the king pushed his soldiers into enemy lines.

The same was true for the war Malcoy fought for the princeps. As legion commander, he had given his orders from the safety of the rear. And even then, Malcoy's advice was not accepted. He could watch on as the princeps died.

Even if he had merely been following along with the Empire's cause, he did not admit his lack of command. He gave up all responsibility, saying it happened because the princeps did not listen to him. It is very inappropriate for Malcoy to act as if he knew all about war.

It is no different from the foolish sword that had flaunted its arrogance as if it knew the entire world. That is why I could see it: How such a rare talent was being wasted, consumed by arrogance and ignorance.

I was thinking of putting the man at my side; Malcoy's ability as a commander was essential to the kingdom. But for now, it was impossible. My first priority was to fix Malcoy's temper, distorted after his betrayal by his country's people. The most urgent need was for Malcoy's worldview to be broken, an ideology that had been hardened by years of unripe insights.

And to do that, Malcoy had to suffer.

He had to vomit until he could no more; he had to start thinking that it would be better to die. His useless thoughts and worries had to be pushed aside, far away. If someone is hit so hard, their false beliefs and values, borne from immature insights, would also disappear.

I awaited that moment and gave my orders in the meantime.

"Make sure they roll against him, wave after wave. Until I tell you to stop."

Jordan said he was sick of being a nanny, but he still faithfully fulfilled my orders.

I always had Malcoy in sight, even though I was cutting through the imperial besiegers without pause. To be honest, to watch him suffer so much did make me feel very regretful.

Still… I am the witness of countless battles and turbulences.

I am the harbinger who has ended endless wars and turmoil.

And this kid, who dared proclaim himself a master of war in front of me, needed to suffer a little more.

CHAPTER 191
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (4)

The Imperial Army withdrew, and it was a complete retreat, not a withdrawal to prepare for another day's siege.

"They were free to leave when they came. Not now, when they're going."

I had no intention of letting the imperial forces finish their business and return to their lands. Not after they so excitedly beat against the citadel's walls for fifteen days.

"Gather the Knights."

"All have already gathered in front of the gate, waiting for your Highness to come," said the garrison captain as he pointed to the gate. Lancers in black iron armor were in front of the gatehouse, clutching their cavalry lances. My knights were also there at the fore. They had been locked in these walls for a time, so they were resentful.

"Open the citadel gate!" I cried out, being in such a hurry that I gave the order before I went down the wall. The garrison commander had been waiting for me and ordered the gate to be opened. Leaving behind the noise of the ramparts, I immediately joined up with the Black Lancers.

"You're late! We wanted to be back already," Quéon complained about my sluggishness before my feet were even in the stirrups.

"Go!"

Instead of answering, I kicked into my horse's flanks and rode forward.

"Ride out!"

Quéon followed me, leading a hundred Black Lancers. I saw the retreating Imperial Army in the distance. They might have been retreating after a failed siege, but their numbers were still greater than our forces in the citadel. That is why, even in retreat, they did not evince the urgency unique to the defeated soldier. Their morale might

have been damaged due to failing at their purpose, but they still maintained their ranks and order while retreating.

I didn't like their relaxed attitude; it is best for defeated soldiers to run away from the enemy like thousands of yapping dogs, tails between their legs.

I drew all the mana from my heart, and the energy and spirit I had been keeping back all this time was released at once.

'Goo-oh-oh-oh~'

The air raged as my presence spread in all directions and finally reached the enemy's rear.

Those imperials in the rearguard turned our way, and I shouted as I lit a flame along the edge of my sword.

"Charge!"

'Dukudukudukuduku~'

The sound of more than a hundred horses striking the earth with their hooves resonated over the plains. The white faces of the imperial troops were clearly seen, and in the next moment, their screams, yells, and urgent cries were clearly heard.

"They're just a small handful!" the imperial army commander bellowed out with mana. "Back ranks, turn about and deal with the foe! The rest, move on the border!"

None of those in the rear turned around. Instead, they pushed at the soldiers in front of them as they fled. It was natural, for the presence of the Sword Master who has reached such a high place was no less than a natural disaster to these soldiers. I was not sure, but by now, these imperial soldiers were feeling the terror of a great tsunami or landslide at their backs.

Those in the rear could not get out of the way, no matter how much they pushed at the backs of their comrades. The confusion was spreading like a plague through their ranks, with the fear of those in the rear extending

all the way to those in the van.

Their orderly lines quickly became crowded, broken, and messed up. Gone was the strict military division; all were mixed together, and the entire army looked like a wild beast fleeing a bushfire.

“Move!”

“Ahhhh!”

I gave a happy laugh as I watched them run away, pushing aside and trampling over allies to live.

Now they looked like a defeated army, and I would give these losers a fate that suited them.

‘Bwak!’

I jumped into the midst of the routed soldiers. My sword blazed as I cried out for the death of my enemies. In this way, I made them all know that the only future given to them is one of despair.

“Tread on the enemy!”

“Don’t leave even one alive!”

The imperial troops screamed as the Black Lancers trampled them.

“No!”

“Help me!”

They screamed like frightened sheep.

“For Balahard!”

“Thank you for this victory!”

Lancers howled like fierce black wolves.

* * *

Only a few hundred of the imperials who had besieged the citadel remained alive when the battle was over. The entire field was littered with the dead. And only a quarter of those corpses had been cut down by swords or stabbed by spears; the rest were all killed by their own side amid the confusion. I had deliberately used my energy to breed terror in them so that they slashed out in panic, not able to judge the situation. The Black Lancers had also tricked them, harrying them from the flanks so that the entire imperial army was pushed back and forth and, in that confusion, was eventually wiped out.

"Your Highness," Quéon softly called to me after he had shaken the blood from his lance.

Instead of answering him, I picked up the imperial army's banner from where it lay buried beneath the corpses.

"We won!" the lancers shouted, declaring our victory.

"Woah!" shouts bursts out from afar, from the distant citadel.

"Let's go back."

I took the imperial banner in hand and turned my horse about.

"Long live the prince!"

"Long live the kingdom!"

Even while we passed through the gates, the soldiers continued to shout. I raised my hand, and the shouts died down.

"I pay homage to your struggles and affirm your daring," I announced.

I could see the joy of those who had survived, the uplifted faces of those who had saved the citadel and claimed victory.

"You are the heroes of your country!" I shouted. "You are the guardians of the kingdom!"

"Woow aahhh!"

The thrill of triumph swept through the citadel as a collective shout burst out.

As I watched the enthusiastic soldiers, I gave quiet instructions to the citadel's garrison.

"Release some supplies so that the soldiers can enjoy the spoils of victory today."

Fortunately, there were quite many supplies abandoned by the imperial army, so it would be enough for these soldiers to enjoy the day, forget the hardships of war, and celebrate their victory.

"Thank you, your Highness."

"I just want to thank your grace for your mercy."

Later that day, the soldiers who had been provided with an abundance of food and drink expressed their gratitude every time I passed.

"Your Highness saved my life. Had your Highness not come, I would've been a corpse now."

"I'm glad I did it. I can't remember all the guys I've saved and am glad to hear it wasn't just one or two. So drink until you forget, eat, and enjoy yourself. A day like today doesn't come around often."

Every time they spoke, they congratulated me or tried to hand me a drink. As I wandered among the soldiers, I suddenly remembered something important that had slipped my mind.

"Jordan!"

"Yes? Yes!"

Jordan had been chewing on a hump of freshly-baked horse shank. He now trotted to me from afar.

"What about Malcoy?" I demanded.

"Malcoy… Malcoy… I saw him on the wall until the end."

“Find him and bring him to me.”

“You mean now? Or later?”

“Do I have to get him myself, then?”

Jordan started to walk away slowly, his mouth mumbling complaints once he was five feet from me.

“Do this – do that. Can’t a bloke get some rest and comfort? What the hell did I do wrong?”

“Aren’t you going too quickly?” I inquired.

“Ah, I’m going, I’m going.”

The ranger disappeared, spouting his dissent. He soon returned.

“I caught him standing blankly on the wall.”

I shook my hand at Jordan, saying, “Okay, go about your business.”

“Yeah. If you have anything else you need done, please call someone else next time. There is a lot of idle folks here.”

Jordan wanted me to respond to his words, but I didn’t say a thing. The ranger company commander wasn’t important right now.

“Malcoy.”

As I called to him, Malcoy raised his head, flinching when he looked at me. I smiled as I looked at his face, covered in blood, sweat, and dust.

“Now, you have a face that suits the battlefield.”

Malcoy raised his hand and touched his face, not knowing how it looked.

“Follow,” I said and headed to Jordan, who was drooping against a distant wall.

“Give me a bottle of liquor,” I ordered him.

“Why aren’t you looking for booze in the storeroom of the citadel’s garrison commander?” Jordan asked.

“So that’s a no?” I challenged him.

“If you just go there and come back out-”

Before Jordan was done speaking, he took a bottle of wine from his cloak and handed it to me.

“Really… really, there’s only one bottle of this stuff. Really.”

Hearing Jordan being on the defensive when he didn’t have to be, it seemed to me that he had more liquor.

“If you’re going to drink it,” Jordan implored, “drink it out of sight of other folk. Even if the others don’t know about it, it won’t be nice if the Lancers see that bottle.”

The ranger suddenly shut his mouth.

“Is there any more, Jordan? I was looking for suitable wine to go drink someplace tonight.”

Jordan looked as if he wanted to yell at me, and the senior rangers around him shook their heads.

In silence, I reached out my hand, and he handed me a bottle.

“Really, really, really- This last one is the only one I have. It’s the lifeboat that any ranger must keep with him to maintain his body temperature in stressful situations.”

“Hey, that means we’ve been cheated! You’ve been holding out on us!”

The other senior rangers jumped up, swearing as they closed in upon Jordan.

“Hcha! That such a bastard is also a company commander!”

“This liar wants his knees crushed!”

While the rangers were having a good time and a friendly chat with Jordan, I dragged

Malcoy, who stood there with a vacant expression, to a secluded spot.

We went up to battlements. Few other people were there. I sat down casually on one of the merlons, then uncorked one of the bottles Jordan had given me.

I savored the hot smell of the wine, then suddenly started gulping it down. It tasted far better than I had expected; it wasn't the cheap stuff that the soldiers drank.

"Fuck. He managed to steal some bottles from the Imperial Army's supplies."

While I admired Jordan's skill, I handed the bottle to Malcoy, who still vacantly stood before me. Malcoy didn't hesitate; he pushed the bottle's lip into his mouth, and tilted his head back.

'Glug glug glug.'

Malcoy had halved the bottle in an instant, and his face soon flushed red.

With his color returned, he looked better.

"Okay. What do you think? Still feel the same?"

Malcoy gazed at me, bottle in hand.

"You still think that war is ugly and that everyone who fights in wars is the same?"

Malcoy didn't answer. I didn't want to force an answer from him. I reached out in silence, took the bottle from him, and brought it to my mouth.

"Aah. It tastes real good. Are the Empire's guys drinking this class of wine, even during the war? Must be like this because their country is rich."

It was a wrong emotion to feel, but I sincerely admired the might of the Empire.

However, I did not take my seat to eat or drink, so I returned to the original topic.

"So, war is ugly, and all soldiers are perpetrators. I've known a few guys who made such sounds before."

When Leonberg had first been settled upon this earth, there were many who talked

like that.

“In wars, there are those who sit in their high places of safety, wrapped up in their greed, while men die for their convictions, giving their lives so that others can live.”

While Leonberg’s knights and soldiers bled under the imperial invasion, there are scholars who stay safe in the rear, behaving as if they have mastered all the truths of the universe.

“But none of those men, who talk about war in that way, have ever been on the battlefield.”

Malcoy’s lips moved, but he shut his mouth again. I already knew what he had wanted to say.

“So you’re talking about the horrors of war? Right. War is terrible. On the battlefield, humans do not exist as humans, and war sweeps the land clean.”

War is indeed a monster that exists by taking the lives of the living, and only grief, scars, and hatred remains in the place where the beast of war passed by.

“But Malcoy, there are some things in this world that cannot be helped. One of them is war.”

Malcoy frowned as he looked at me. I could read him: He saw me as an irresponsible knight who judged something by glancing at it; a hypocrite who rationalizes war.

I snorted as I faced his blame-filled gaze and asked him, “Was it our kingdom which has caused the current war? Do the soldiers of Leonberg look like war maniacs to you?”

Malcoy didn’t answer because he knew: Leonberg did not start this war. The horror of war he spoke of was the only means for us to defend our land.

“If the Leonberger family did not declare independence, there would have been no war,” Malcoy managed to say after a while.

Rather than trying to defeat my central premise, he spoke in a stubborn voice, unable to overcome his convictions.

“So you are telling us to live on while being robbed and stepped on? If that was the case, then not so many people would’ve died. Do you just want us to live with the oppression?” I asked Malcoy.

“If we just live like that, what makes us different from animals? The king is the king, and the nobles are the nobles. The Leonbergers are the Leonbergers. Must they live as something that they are not?”

“Isn’t this war what the Leonberger royal family and a few nobles wanted?” Malcoy asked.

I could only cluck my tongue.

It seemed that it hadn’t been enough for him to suffer on the fortress wall. I guessed that I had to roll more obstacles his way for a while.

CHAPTER 192
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (5)

Shortly after Malcoy left me, his lieutenant came.

“You were alone with Malcoy,” he asked as he sat down before I even offered him a seat. Percival’s gaze was nailed on me. As I watched Percival’s nostrils flaring and him swallowing his spittle, I smelled the alcohol on him. Unlike his commander, I gave the man his own bottle of wine because we got along well.

“I was thirsty for another drink,” Percival said as he took the bottle, brought it to his mouth, and tilted his head back. His throat moved like a worm a few times, and then he took the bottle from his mouth.

“Hmm. Nice, what stuff is this?” Percival asked as he wiped his mouth exaggeratedly and gave the wine back to me.

“Malcoy’s answer seems to have been dissatisfying.”

When I nodded, Percival regarded me with me a friendly expression.

“War is unjust. It is the minority pushing the majority into enemy lines. He probably said something like this.”

“You know him well,” I stated.

Percival reached out his hand and once more grasped the bottle.

“He is probably confused,” he said. “Not everything in this fortress will match Malcoy’s common sense.”

“Common sense… To find any common sense on the battlefield, you have to be less conscious about ideology.”

“That’s it,” agreed Percival, “but honestly, this fortress is not normal to me.”

Percival had been sipping his wine and casually talking all this time; he now lowered his voice.

“The knights and soldiers here are like… They don’t seem to be afraid of dying. And especially those soldiers there. I swear, I’ve never seen anyone like them.”

Percival turned his head, and I followed his gaze. There were a bunch of guys cheering, giggling, and dancing ridiculous dances. They were the Rangers of Balahard, and Jordan was there as well.

“They were fighting for the lives of others. When I fight, I do so not to die. Compared to them… they were flying along the walls like ghosts, and they saved many of their own soldiers.”

I had to nod. It was as Percival said: The rangers had flown. Men like them, who had dealt with ferocious orcs with leather-hard hides, were like fish meeting water now that they faced human foes.

At first, the rangers had been a bit more humane when dealing with the imperial soldiers. Now, they made fun of them, saying that it was Balahard’s shame whenever someone was injured by an imperial. The imperial knights could not touch the rangers, while the clever rangers knew they could not face knights more powerful than they. As if herding an orc warrior toward an allied knight, the rangers did the same with the imperials. A great number of the Empire’s knights died from a knife or crossbow bolt in the back.

“It’s not just them,” said Percival. “There are others who are also not afraid of death.”

This time, his gaze settled on the soldiers of the Southern Army, who were enjoying a quiet rest.

“I’ve never seen soldiers so eager to kill the enemy.”

The southern soldiers had long been suffering the Imperial Army’s scorn, and the death of the queen was the final insult to them. Even if they died, the absolute will to decimate the enemy was nothing new to the southerners.

The same held true for the militiamen. They had volunteered for a war that they did not have to fight, so their morale and determination were as great as that of the rangers and southerners. I didn’t even have to say anything about the knights, who

have always considered it an honor to fight until they fell upon the field of battle.

Percival had seen the knights and soldiers in action, and he was convinced.

“Perhaps that’s why,” he suddenly said in a heavy tone as his gaze turned in the direction in which his commander had left, “it’s difficult for Malcoy-nim to accept the situation right now.”

Percival took a swig from the bottle at once.

“Because the knights and soldiers of Marseille were not the same.”

The ideal image that the little prince of that time hoped the knights and soldiers of his country would conform to had surely been no different from the scene playing out in this citadel.

“In order for Malcoy-nim to endure his captivity when he was young, he needed people to blame – and there were the right people for it.”

Malcoy came to hate the nobles and knights who had forsaken their vows and the soldiers who had dropped their swords, fearing for their deaths. The little prince of the ruined Marseille thus resented the traitors as he endured prison life, and he even brainwashed himself into believing that none of it would’ve happened was it not for war.

“He’s a real fool,” I observed.

“It’s not something that can’t be understood. Malcoy was just a child at that time, and he had lost everything in a single day. If I think of him at that age, I understand. He must have felt useless, not able to do anything.”

Percival defended his commander, clearly not wanting me to insult the man. I chose not to object to his statement, but I knew that always thinking about the past, as if there was no one else in the world, was unhealthy.

“So please be gentle. He is a smart man. He will soon see reality for what it is.”

Instead of answering Percival, I offered him the wine.

“Excuse me, please,” Percival said after he finished the bottle and stood up. Even after

he had left, his head hanging, I was still thinking.

Perhaps the end of the Marseille Kingdom could be the future of our kingdom.

No- Even if the corrupted nobles had not been purged in advance, they would have been slaughtered when the queen's death ignited the flame of war in the people's hearts.

The kingdom still faced great peril, though. Even if we were determined, nothing had truly changed. The Empire was still huge, and Leonberg still weak. The queen's embers were burning everywhere, but I didn't know if the hearts of the soldiers and the people would remain the same if the war became prolonged, if conditions remained the same for many years.

In all likelihood, they would start to blame the royal family for providing the Empire with a casus belli.

I had to find a way to prevent that. In the current war, we were merely enduring, and victory against the Empire was impossible if Leonberg just hung on and never pushed back.

In a war of attrition, it was Leonberg that would eventually collapse, even if the enemy suffered losses several times greater than ours. Before the long-burning flame snuffs out, before all of Leonberg's forces became soaked in drizzle and melted away – we had to reverse this situation.

"The Eastern Fleet must play that role."

I believed and did not doubt that the king and the fleet would return with news of victory after sailing to attack the Empire. However, time passed, and no news was heard of the king and his assault. Whether there was a battle, if it was won or lost – the news would surely have arrived by now. There was nothing. My ominous imagination kept disturbing my anxious mind, and I shook my head with vigor every time to clear away such thoughts.

The King of Dotrin and the Knights of the Sky were among those who have left for the Empire, and many believed that Dotrin's ruler would be able to overcome any difficulties.

The descendants of the Sky Blade, Umbert, were real monsters. While I continued to

struggle with my worries, the Imperial Army continued to batter Leonberg's borders.

The Gifted Lion Citadel was attacked countless times. Until now, not a single fortress or stronghold had been taken from us, but that was no reassurance. There were reports that, in addition to the forces currently attacking the border, many legions were marching toward it.

And it was said that a large number of paladins and wizards were included among the enemy forces marching here. Once they arrived, the battles would become twice as hard as they are now.

But there wasn't much I could do about it at this moment; all I could do was smash those imperial forces attacking the citadel.

There was a battle every day. The Rangers were still holding up well, but the southern soldiers had long since started to face the limits of their endurance. Rangers and knights constantly ran across the narrow battlements to relieve the exhausted soldiers, to fill the gaps.

I participated in the battles more actively than before, constantly reciting war poetry and energizing my allies. With mana gathered on the edge of my sword, I ran across the walls. In the process, the knights cut down by my hand were already beyond count, and a total of five enemy commanders owed their deaths to my efforts.

And by that time, the enemy was no longer our citadel. Thanks to that, we were given a chance to recover, but the burden on other fortresses increased, with all the imperial troops who gave up on attacking us heading to other strongholds.

I left the citadel with only the Black Lancers, and Malcoy and Percival came along as well.

We wandered across the land like madmen.

Whenever the news came that a friendly fortress was in danger, we mounted up, even if we had been sleeping, and rushed to the battlefield. Malcoy was tormented by the insanity of our deployment. He tried hard to hide his weakness and desperately tried not to fall behind. I always made sure that Malcoy rode at my side. Of course, being next to me often meant being where the fighting was fiercest.

Malcoy escaped the various pitfalls of death countless times. Percival and I helped

him to trump the greater crises every time, but we could not prevent the smaller wounds from accumulating on his body. As Malcoy's injuries increased, so too did he become more and more soldier-like.

"A few words would have been enough," he told me. "A war fought to protect is still a war."

It was clear that Malcoy's beliefs remained unchanged.

"I have to push him some more, then."

Each time, I just smiled at him and made sure he charged into battle. I firmly believed that if he wielded his sword, intent upon survival, the thoughts filling his head would disappear. But Malcoy was a persistent man. Whenever a battle was over, he came to me and talked about 'real war.'

It was the same long story, and it was one that was not worth listening to.

"What's the answer?" he would ask. "Is there an answer?"

He always wanted me to tell it to him so that he could judge it. I pretended not to hear him, and every time, Malcoy continued with his patient protests. Despite his efforts, I had no intention of sating his curiosity with words.

"It's still far away, Malcoy."

I told him that he had to find the answer on his own and turned around. Then, on a day when we crossed the border, I realized that the wide wire of his obstinacy had become narrow; Malcoy had stopped talking bullshit.

"Why? Why don't you talk about what real war is?" he asked with a tired face. "I am no longer curious."

He looked like he was about to die on the spot, and it seemed that he was asking himself whether the answer was important. I laughed; I was quite happy that Malcoy had now become fit for the battlefield. In fact, there had been no answer from the beginning. There is no answer to war.

I had merely wanted to shake away the arrogance and resentment that filled Malcoy's mind, for he was acting as if he had mastered the world despite his lack of

insight.

There were countless ways to get rid of misapprehension in this world, and my preferred method was to push them to the point where their judgment was no longer clouded.

The results were satisfactory. Malcoy no longer spoke bullshit, and he didn't waste his precious breaks by pondering on useless worries.

"We return to the Gifted Lion Citadel."

I led the Black Lancers home, smashing through the enemy to reach the citadel. The imperial forces that have been advancing on the border began to withdraw slowly, and it seemed to me that they were preparing to join up with the marching reinforcements.

My prediction proved correct.

"The report states that the enemy reinforcements are now a week's march from the border. The exact scale of their force will only be known once our scouts return from their reconnaissance, but I believe they will be at least forty thousand strong."

Sighs were heard all over the room.

We had destroyed or scattered more than fifteen legions while holding the border, and even while the Empire ridiculed our efforts, they sent more legions to the front.

Once more, the moment had come for us to reduce the difference in power. And it was known that among the additional imperial forces, there were wizards and paladins.

From here on out, we faced the real hump; but it was not time to give up and die.

Such was the case now.

"Your Highness! Reinforcements are here!"

As I ran to the north gate to look at the distant plain, I saw figures in white cloaks escorted by rangers. They were the wizards of the White Night Tower who the High Lich had said would be ready in half a year. They had finally achieved solidity in their

craft, now appearing on the front line. But that wasn't all.

Along with the wizards came some unexpected guests.

CHAPTER 193
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (6)

Winter Castle reinforcements finally reached the fort, and I went out to the north gate to greet them.

“Rangers, halt!”

When the leading ranger shouted this, the rangers took up a stationary posture. In front of the rangers appeared one of the White Night Tower’s wizards, the white hems of their robes flaring out elegantly.

“Your Highness.”

He was a man who had once dreamed of becoming a knight, the second son of the Tailheim family who abandoned the path of the ring and created a magical circle in his body.

“Taylor of the White Night Tower and sixteen other wizards greets the Crown Prince of Leonberg!” Taylor cried out in an excited tone.

“You have come a long way,” I quietly replied as I shook Taylor Tailheim’s hand.

There were many things I wanted to ask. What was this winter like, and how were Vincent and his rangers doing? How fared the situation in the mountain range?

“We will talk later.”

Instead of asking questions, I turned my head.

‘Shuck~ Shuck~’

Hundreds of pairs of steel boots made a great noise as their owners came before me and stopped.

A company of troops with black hoods over their heads stood in front of me, and

upon their armor, on a black background, was engraved an inverted white-yellow flame. The backpacks they carried were almost larger than their bodies. They were dwarves, but not just any dwarves: They were the elites of the fiercest and most belligerent members of their race, the war experts of the Boiling Iron Legion. The Iron Legion's symbol was, of course, the inverted flame.

The dwarf at their head suddenly flipped back his hood and stepped before me. He took off his horned helm, placing it under his armpit, and pounded his fist upon his breastplate.

"I'm Gurkha, Chief of Haven. I came to help you with one arm of our clan's warriors."

He was the commander of Haven; he was a great dwarven general.

"Adrian Leonberger. I never thought the dwarves would send reinforcements."

"If you truly thought that, you have taken our dwarven friendship too lightly. We dwarves never pretend ignorance about our friends' troubles," Ghurka said as he shook my hand in with a wicked grip, laughing as he revealed his sparse teeth. He smiled like a feral wolf and had a strong laugh.

"I understand. Welcome anyway."

"Can I look around the castle?" Ghurka asked as he glanced back. Following his gaze, I saw five carts covered in thick cloth.

"Cannons?"

"A small number, aye, but I bet they will be quite useful."

"And not just any cannons," I noted, "but the iron guns of the Iron Legion."

"You know the name of our legion?"

"I read a few sentences in a book."

"And what was written of us?"

"That you are an army of fierce dwarven warriors."

“That’s not true,” said Ghurka as he shook his head, contemplating my words.

“We warriors of the Iron Legion are not just fierce – we are very, very fierce and brilliant warriors.”

After Ghurka said that, he laughed out loud, his face flushing. He seemed to think his answer was terribly witty. Even if Gurkha’s tone was playful, the confidence contained in the boast was real.

The Iron Legion deserved the praise; they were one the most powerful fighting groups I knew of.

I was able to endure his uninteresting jokes, just being grateful in that moment that we had unexpectedly gained a powerful reinforcement.

I called the garrison commander and ordered him to guide the dwarves around the citadel right away. Several dwarves left with the commander, while Ghurka and the remaining dwarves headed to the citadel under the guidance of soldiers.

I gave a happy laugh as I looked at the backs of the small yet hard dwarves. I laughed only for a while, then once more refining my expression. The dwarves weren’t the only unexpected guests, and unlike the dwarves, the remaining guests were not very welcome.

A little further off, there stood a hundred men and women with their heads held up high.

Their red cloaks were gorgeous and graceful, adorned with gold thread. Their ivory-colored helmets covered their noses, and their shoulder armor was very elegant and strongly shaped. The white uniforms revealed under their cloaks looked pure and sacred, like priestly robes, but their well-groomed energy felt as sharp as a sword.

Their figures were also superb, and the guards on the wall clamored to get a closer look at them.

It was fortunate that their faces were hidden behind helmets; were it not so, the uproar would have been several magnitudes greater. There are few humans who can control their minds when seeing the bared faces of elves.

But to me, that pristine off-white tint of their faces was uncomfortable and

disgusting. It is because I knew better than anyone what dark interiors and snake-like natures their angelic visages hid. There was also no reason for me to welcome the sudden appearance of the elves since my breakup with Sigrun had not been very pleasant.

Their sudden presence churned my insides when the end of the half-elves, their miserable slaughter, came into my mind like a vision. All those memories I had suppressed, that mental anguish and anger, rose up within me.

Jordan also felt that anger.

'Shuck~'

The rangers had spread in all directions and now leveled their crossbows on the elves they had surrounded. This was not the time and place for cheerful rangers making crazy jokes; all the men's eyes were as fierce as in any battle.

"Your Highness, just give the word, and they'll have as many holes as a honeycomb right away," Jordan said to me, his voice cracking. The resentment of my enemy flared up in me, and I knew that I had not forgotten the hatred I had felt when I had come so near death when I dealt with Sigrun.

"They can't even be allowed to talk. Let's kill them where they stand," urged Jordan, and as I heard him, the intense anger that had swelled up in me disappeared. I felt like now was not the time to be angry. I sighed and ordered Jordan to step back.

"I can't stand back. You've been alone before, and you've suffered badly then. This time, I will never withdraw."

"Jordan."

"If you punish me for this, I'll bear the punishment. Now, I cannot obey your Highness's command."

"I know what you're worried about. But I am not the same as I was then, so what you worry about will never happen."

"Every time you said that you were found unconscious. I don't want to see your Highness suffer like that again."

Jordan had always faithfully fulfilled my orders, but this time he did not break his stubbornness. I sighed again. I knew how Jordan was feeling, so I wasn't upset by his repeated disobedience.

But we weren't the only two here; we were in the Gifted Lion Citadel, a fortress at war.

Disobedience to direct orders was in no way acceptable.

"Ranger Company Commander Jordan. I will not say it again. Step back."

Jordan reluctantly withdrew. However, his finger remained on his crossbow's trigger as he stared at the elves, ready to lift his weapon at any time. I had no choice but to leave things as they were, so I stepped away from the rangers and in front of the elves.

Despite being surrounded by numerous rangers, no change had come to their facial features. They just looked at me, their backs straight.

"Did you not hear it from Sigrun? Hear where you faeries should be?"

With enmity in my voice, I informed them that Leonberg had no intention of welcoming them. But the elves remained calm.

'Shuck~'

One of the men stepped forward. At first glance, he was no ordinary elf. His appearance was exceptional, and his energy unusual. I presumed that the man was a High Elf.

"Prince of the Leonberg Kingdom. First of all, I express my sincere apology and consolation on behalf of my race for the terrible error of the Executioner Sigrun…"

The male High Elf chattered on as if he had oiled his tongue.

"This is no elven land. This is the territory of Leonberg. But you elves don't even show proper respect to a prince. And you dare talk so sincerely?"

'Thwad!'

I summoned energy and slammed it into a small area of ground. Having reached such heights, my attack was released in all directions and pressed against the elves.

The male elf had been haughtily talking on, he now hurriedly opened his mouth, his face stern.

“The elf who lives in the forest has committed her rude acts because she is ignorant of the laws of the kingdom.”

The High Elf knelt down on one knee, and the other elves knelt with him.

“Please forgive us.”

The elf once more apologized to me for the atrocities Sigrun had committed.

“I am not the one who will forgive you and not the one who will decide your fate.”

I called the half-elf who had been looking at me from where she stood among the rangers, and she joined my side. Gunn silently looked down at the elves. The High Elf once more had a face filled with humiliation, and the gaze he cast at Gunn was full of contempt and anger. It seemed that it hurt the pride of a noble, pure-blooded elf to be kneeling before a half-elf.

I had no intention of catering to his pride and conceptions of decency.

“They won’t go back alive if you don’t want them to,” I told Gunn as I raised my hand.

The crossbows that the rangers had pointed down were lifted again. The soldiers on the wall were confused, not knowing the situation, but they also pointed their bows at the elves.

The High Elf remained calm. He looked a bit upset, but his expression showed me he had been prepared for this. He seemed to think that all of this was just a bluff to overpower his will and set a baseline.

However, I soon disabused of his carefree spirit when I put my hand on my sword and released my spirit and energy. I channeled my full hostility into it.

The High Elf looked at me with a taut face.

“Prince of the Kingdom. There’s no reason to neglect an envoy like this.”

“A little while ago, you said you were savages who do not know the law, but now you are trying to teach me how to be a human being?”

I spoke up before the elf spewed any more bullshit.

“If you came to apologize on behalf of Sigrun, you should have been prepared to face punishment on behalf of Sigrun.”

The elf protested at my words, stating that it was not fair to be angry at the wrong person. His was a reasonable plea, but I didn’t even let it grace my ears. Since when have elves followed noble causes? They are beings who destroy the lives of others for self-interest or for no reason at all.

I just snorted.

Besides, this wasn’t just a show of my anger, but also a test, a test given to these insidious faeries who have appeared on the kingdom’s borders all of a sudden.

‘Chik~’

Gunn grabbed my sleeve, then shook her head quietly. I removed my hand from my sword’s hilt. The energy I had spread all over was released. The High Elf male looked at me as if displeased.

Unlike the other elves, his face was not pale, rather being relatively calm. This was the nature of a High Elf’s power, a being of great potential from birth.

“How old are you?” I asked the elf.

“Our race’s time and human time are not the same.”

“So, how old are you?”

“It may seem that I am no older than your Highness, but in reality, the time I have lived would require your Highness’s life to be repeated seven times, and more.”

His gaze reminded me of my own temporal situation; I could understand his emotions. For a High Elf, age was status and strength, and I knew well how

insignificant humans beings were to their kind. However, I felt the same about him.

“My age is, roughly, a little over a hundred and fifty.”

I had existed since the era of the Great War. In my eyes, this elf was a child.

CHAPTER 194
TRUE SOUL SONG FOR HER (7)

Arrogance was indeed the natural temperament of elves, and wickedness was evidently in their nature.

The elves were terrible egoists who did not sympathize with the pain of others.

Nevertheless, elves in the eye of the public were somewhat arrogant, yet beautiful, good, and gentle, like angels. Very few were aware of their evil nature because the elves were good at hiding their wickedness. They appeared as beneficent and beauteous, their expressions innocent, and their voices as soft as the spring breeze. Their speech was gentle, and their attitudes humble.

It was no easy thing to grasp: That an ugly nature was hidden behind all of that. And so, the elves were able to conceal their innate wickedness. For some reason, the elves didn't show their feelings. If their inner thoughts are ever expressed, it is done so intentionally. Those emotions the elves reveal result from facial expressions and gestures that they have created by rote and learning over the years.

Their angelic appearance and refined manners are the inevitable results of their efforts, and they are able to hide their true souls. However, elves aren't good at hiding themselves from others from the moment of their birth. They are too pure in their intent and clumsy at hiding it from an early age, like all living things in the world.

The truth of it is that the days allotted to other races are too short compared to elven lives, and during the short lifespans of humanity, the rat-like compassion and goodwill elves give to humans never wear out. And so it is that humans remain faithful to the character and nature they imagine the elven race to have.

Although there are individual differences, it takes about fifty years for an elf to craft this veneer of benevolence fully. However, that is the case for an ordinary elf; High Elves are far different. They are creatures with lifespans three to four times longer than normal elves, and it also takes them longer to completely develop the hypocrisy and sophistication unique to elves.

The High Elf in front of me was a hundred-and-fifty years old.

I looked at him again, and beneath his uplifting expression, I saw his unhappy eyes. He had the natural elven character and arrogance, though not yet the hypocrisy and the prowess to hide it.

And such a creature stood before me, arrogant. Laughter flowed from me. Where did this guy come from?

However, my laughter did not last long; I soon fell into thought.

In order for young High Elves to come into the world, they must obtain permission from other High Elves. I didn't understand: They must have known this damned elf wasn't ready for the world, but they still gave him a mission and sent him outside. And this as an envoy to a human prince who has been aggrieved by the elves.

It wasn't normal. I repeatedly devised theories and finally found the answer.

"Is he a sacrificial sheep?"

It was a gift from the insidious elves to me, so that my hatred and anger arising from Sigrun's actions may be subdued; so that my wroth and resentment is not directed toward the entire elven race. The offering was obvious, and I asked the High Elf a few questions to confirm it. I asked what his mission was and what he was to do after the mission.

In response, he conveyed the regret of his clan for Executioner Sigrun's errors. He added that it was his duty to remain under my command – to strengthen the friendship between the elves and Leonberg. He also said that he was asked not to place his own life above his mission to restore the lost trust and to follow any orders.

I became more convinced of my speculations. The king of the elves had even kindly added that one order so that I could not misunderstand his intentions: Whether you grill him or boil him, whether you eat him as porridge or alive – do whatever you want.

"Good. I don't accept your apologies, but I'll be grateful for the help."

My personality was such that I did not refrain from accepting gifts, so I decided to accept this one. The High Elf looked at me questioningly after my sudden change of

attitude. His reaction was unique compared to other elves I've known.

"Your name is?"

"We are the Swordsingers, and I am the Captain of the Whispering Winds, Arnand."

I looked at the guy as he spoke of affiliations that I didn't even ask for.

"Good. Arnand. I will allow you to enter."

"Thank you," he said after a while.

I didn't know what would happen to him in the future. He might be slaughtered like a mouse, butchered like a pig.

"It's up to you whether you'll be thankful," I said as I laughed at Arnand, my heart like a butcher's looking at a plump pig.

* * *

Both groups of guests were equally unexpected, yet their treatment was utterly different. The dwarves of the Iron Legion were greeted with enthusiasm by the rangers, and I also welcomed them as friends and distinguished guests. Their freedom to do whatever they wanted inside the citadel was guaranteed, and their lodgings and meals were in no way poor. We took utmost care of them.

It was a different case for the elves.

Their lodgings were a temporary barracks set up under the courtyard walls, and they could not leave the yard without my permission.

"If anyone has contact with the elves, they will face severe punishment."

The rangers on the walls and spires watched them day and night. And so, their freedom was limited, and they were thoroughly quarantined. A lot was said for a while concerning my actions.

"This is too much… Neglecting those who come to help the kingdom?"

"I know. It is right to repay good faith with good faith."

Several southern knights and commanders came to me, suggesting that I improve the treatment of the elves. They found it unfortunate that I did not show chivalry and philanthropy toward the beautiful elves.

“They are those who do not need it and end up using you for showing it. Vigilance and surveillance must never be neglected toward their kind.”

After I heard their request, I explained the elves’ insidiousness and warned them not to be fooled by the angelic appearance of elves. After that, I asked them, again and again, to be on the lookout for the elves’ snake-like nature.

The southerners were not completely convinced, but they did not dare ask me to improve the treatment of elves anymore. There were more important things to be thinking of. While I made sure that I did not need to hear more stories about the elves, the dwarves completed the installation of iron cannons on the east, west, north, and south walls.

The wizards from the White Night Tower also finished their preparations. Meanwhile, news came that the enemy reinforcements who had reached the border had begun marching. The Charitable Lion Citadel quietly prepared to meet the foe.

“Paladins are a threat, but the real problem is the imperial wizards. The knights and soldiers of Leonberg have no experience in dealing with wizards.”

Meetings were held every day, and the most prevalent topic was that of imperial wizards.

The power of magic was very unfamiliar to the kingdom’s army because the Empire long ago dried up the seeds of battle magic in Leonberg. Even those knights and commanders who did not feel the others’ fear expressed vague anxiety and concern about such an unknown power.

“Unlike our allied wizards, who have trained for at least two to three years, the imperial wizards have devoted themselves to magic for at least ten years to a few decades. That’s my biggest worry – will our allied wizards be able to counter the enemy’s magic properly?”

Even while we had wizards on our side, most of the commanders distrusted their abilities.

It was natural; as they said, the training period of our wizards was only a few years compared to that of the enemy wizards, who had spent decades honing their craft.

But I believed in Ophelia. Where magic was concerned, she was a very arrogant being, knowing no compromise. If she has sent these sorcerers to the front, it meant that they had reached a level where they could play a part in the war. Of course, saying this would not convince the commanders. The name of 'White Night Mage' might have been famous all over the world four hundred years ago; no one knew of it now. So, I came up with another countermeasure.

I recited an old legend, omitting some parts, for the commanders.

"The faeries are the best at magic and herbalism, while the dwarves are the best at crafting and metallurgy. When it comes to battle and hunting, the orcs are the most outstanding. In terms of power and wisdom, the giants are the greatest."

The commanders had confused faces as they heard me recite – all of a sudden – a legend they had never heard. However, they soon realized that 'faerie' meant 'elf,' and they became excited.

"Elves are natural enemies of human wizards."

Elves are born with spirits that can achieve the completion of magic faster than anyone else. In some cases, they have the special ability to intervene in the forming of magic and even twist the results of it. To manifest magic in front of such elves, you have to be at least a mage-class wizard, having woven at least six circles. Mages don't fall from the sky, however. Even if there were imperial wizards that have reached such a level, the number facing us would only be one or two.

And if that number remained constant, I was sure the wizards could be held in check. The leader of the elves was a High Elf, after all, even if he was young.

"In addition, we have the iron cannons installed by the dwarves on the citadel. The power of such cannons is as good as flames and thunderbolts generated by wizards."

I lauded the might of the Iron legion in front of the commanders. Although they remained dubious, I saw that some of their anxiety had been relieved for the first time. It was really frustrating that the soldiers of a citadel guarded by dwarves and faeries were afraid of wizards. After I had explained things to the commanders, I gave them their orders and ended the meeting.

After I had held a meeting with words that didn't match my temper, I felt exhausted, as if I had been in battle for three days and nights.

Once the commanders had left me alone, I heard a blunt voice.

"It's frustrating that I can't see you."

I turned my head, and there stood Percival, who had attended the meeting in his capacity as a guest.

"That's what Malcoy said."

Before I could ask why it was frustrating, Percival told me that it was his commander's words. And then I saw Malcoy: His face looked a bit clogged up as if he had eaten a basket of sweet potatoes without water. Percival struck Malcoy on the shoulder.

"Tell me. Why are you not saying what you want to say?" I asked.

"What can I say if the subject is so low?" replied Malcoy.

"Because he didn't like to see all the citadel commanders or the Crown Prince being so frustrated," came Percival's blatant words, and they made an impression on Malcoy.

I urged Malcoy to correct his slackness, step up, and speak his mind. He reluctantly came forward as I repeated my demand.

"Everything is too passive," Malcoy said, and much of what he went on to say were criticisms of the Royal Army's response.

"They play a card game, and when the opponent shows a card, they look at their hand and try to play a countering card. They don't think to move first but are in a hurry to follow their opponent. So, it becomes important to do well all the time. Because you are on the defensive, I understand to some extent, but Leonberg's army is taking too much currently."

I frowned at Malcoy's words. I knew all too well that the kingdom could be destroyed at the end of the war. So, I was waiting for an opportunity for a reversal. I could not deny Malcoy's view of things, however, knowing r that our response was being

dragged along by the movement of the imperial forces. I crossed my arms and jerked my head at Malcoy. “Continue.”

“It shouldn’t be like this. Even if you win ten times and defeat thirty legions, the kingdom will not be able to go on the offensive later if things go on in this manner.”

“So?”

“You have to act first. You have to make the Empire move along with the kingdom,” Malcoy said as he looked straight at me.

His was a provocative look as if saying, ‘There is a way, but I don’t know if you can pull it off.’

“Do not uselessly provoke me, and continue with what you are saying.”

Malcoy’s face grew dark at my reprimand, and he spoke on.

“We have to shift to the offensive.”

“You know what the situation is right now?”

“I know. I heard all the boring details today. Some legions of the Northeast Imperial Army and about twenty newly arrived reinforcement legions are all marching towards the border.”

“And while knowing that, you tell me to switch to the offensive?” I asked with a frown, and Malcoy laughed.

“The enemy is probably thinking like this,” Malcoy said as he started pointing to different spots on the map and explained the parameters of an operation. Without realizing it, I listened to his explanation, my arms wide over the map and my mind wide awake.

“That is all. It is entirely up to your Highness to decided whether to accept it,” said Malcoy, and the Malcoy who had explained his operation with such passion no longer existed. He told me he had said his piece with a shy face and that the rest was up to me.

And I made my choice.

“After explaining it to me, can you do it in front of others?”

After I had heard his excellent proposal, I knew there was no reason for a boring war.

“That is something I can do,” replied Malcoy, “but they won’t be very happy. Maybe they’ll think the imperial commander is trying to trick them.”

“But I’ll do it myself,” he said, and I immediately summoned the commanders. They all looked confused at the sudden call, and they glanced at Malcoy. He got up from his seat, his face showing his hesitation, and began explaining to everyone how we could take on the Empire. And when his briefing was over, Leonberg’s commanders wore complex expressions. Some noted that, not so long ago, the man planning the operation was a prisoner of war. Others were suspicious of the fact that a prisoner had devised such an operation when they had failed for days and days to come up with any viable measures.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Do you think it’s a good opportunity to outwit the Empire?”

Even though the emotions appearing on each individual’s face were different, their answer was the same: “It’s worth trying.”

“If we succeed, the tide will be reversed.”

Malcoy was rather embarrassed when the commanders expressed their support for his operation, and this was a natural reaction for him to have. Percival once told me that even when his superior served as legion commander, he was often ignored when his counterparts planned operations due to his origin and young age. Moreover, he wasn’t even a legion commander right now, but a man freed from a rugged pit, little different than a prisoner.

It was surprised him that his opinion was considered; it was maybe the first time for Malcoy that others accepted his strategy. An indescribable emotion emerged in Malcoy’s eyes.

The moment that I saw his face, his joy of being recognized by people for the first time, a memory passed through my mind. Whenever I lifted the banner I had claimed at the end of a battle, I experienced the same dizzying, uplifting exultation that I saw in Malcoy’s gaze.

It wasn't difficult for me to guess Malcoy's interior; he would be embarrassed but proud and positive. And I was sure that he didn't expect this, believing that men only gave their lives for those they knew. I guessed that Malcoy would be content with his present emotions, with the moment.

Instead, he enthusiastically devised several more operations on the spot.

Some were not accepted, and others were adequate enough to be supplemented and implemented.

Malcoy constantly gave opinions, his mouth moving all the time as he spoke with the commanders. I exchanged glances with Percival, who touched his lips.

'Didn't I say he'd come over soon?'

'Right. You were right,' I also curled my mouth.

The prince of a ruined realm who hated war no longer existed. All that remained was an avid novice commander who had just begun to gain recognition for his abilities.

"So what would you like to call the operation?" Malcoy, who had been talking for a while, suddenly asked.

"Operation name? Do we need something like that?" one commander asked.

"It is essential for security, and a correction of the old-fashioned operational system."

It seemed that laughter would burst from me at any moment. The man who had been bad-mouthing war a while ago was now, in a ridiculous voice, asking for an operation name. I managed to swallow my laughter, and a thought struck me.

"If you want a name for the operation," I said, still questioning the need for a name but offering one regardless, "it will be called Operation True Soul Song."

There was no better name; it was a song for those who chose death instead of life.

CHAPTER 195
LIGHT A FIRE (1)

I tried to sit down and hold on, but my ass kept shaking with anxiety. Eventually, I couldn't stand it, eventually getting up from my seat.

"Your Highness. Sometimes you have to know when to wait," Malcoy said as he looked at me, wanting me to sit still. I was forced to sit down. Shortly thereafter, I jumped back up.

"We have to go now. If we hurry, we will be able to catch up with those who left first. So, I will go and help."

"They started four days ago, so how do can you say you'll catch up?" Malcoy sighed as he held me back. "Additionally, how many times have I told your Highness that you must be firmly guarding the citadel so that those who have left can fight with confidence?"

I sat down and got up like that countless times, feeling as if I sat upon a thorn cushion. I was very nervous for a while, finally hearing footsteps from outside the council room.

"Your Highness!"

"Come in!" I shouted, and the garrison commander opened the door and entered.

"How did it go?"

The commander gave a bright smile at my breathless question.

"It is said that Sir Arwen has defeated a legion-sized force and is going south as planned!"

"What about Eli?"

"Bernardo Eli has also raided the enemy's supply base, and it is said that he achieved

a considerable record!"

As I heard of our successive victories, my clenched fists felt on fire.

"Alas," Malcoy gasped as he stumbled into the room and fell onto a chair. He had given no serious consideration to waiting before entering, and he seemed to be quite nervous.

"At the moment, all of our allies have successfully infiltrated the enemy's rear. Many of the imperial legions are turning back to counter the chaos behind them," the commander went on.

"How many?"

"It is said that about ten out of thirty-one legions marching to the border have turned back."

As I heard that, I looked at Malcoy. It was playing out exactly as he had expected.

Malcoy had said that if three of our allied legions infiltrate the enemy's rear, at least ten imperial legions advancing upon the border would be diverted. He had also said that this was due to imperial army doctrine, where more than three times the force must always be mobilized to ensure victory. It was also due to the number of imperial nobles who had estates near the border.

"We profit from this," I said, "because we moved three legions to force the feet of ten to turn back."

"It's just the beginning," Malcoy said, his face very sincere. "The success or failure of the operation depends on how good Leonberg's troops infiltrating the rear are doing. Also, the kingdom's borders must stand firm while the imperial rear is being disturbed. If the border falls, everything will be in vain."

Malcoy once again laid out his plans, saying that every moment will be a bumpy one from now on.

"From the standpoint of defense, it is common sense to reduce their front line, but in such a war, only Leonberg loses in the end. Unlike your kingdom, where everything has been suspended for war, the Empire's industries are running smoothly at this moment."

Rather than explaining the plan again, Malcoy struggled to reconsider it and studied the parameters that would make it fail.

“If things are left as they are, the kingdom might not be defeated in a fight, but in the end, it will not be able to bear the enormous funds required by the military. Leonberg will collapse from within. My home country, the Kingdom of Marseille, was also destroyed like that.”

I listened to Malcoy’s explanation and also reviewed his plan. The reinforcements organized in Leonberg’s interior had arrived one after another. By now, the number of allied troops deployed to the border numbered fifteen legions, approximately 30,000 soldiers.

The number of allies who followed the king to the front lines with the Eastern Fleet was about 5,000, so the total number of Leonberg’s troops currently in operation was about 35,000.

Compared to the forty-seven legions the Empire had mobilized for the war, our forces were less than half. Compared to the total force of the Empire, it wasn’t even a handful.

And the strain upon the kingdom’s finances by just fielding this handful of troops was staggering. Had Leonberg not declared independence and organized the confiscation of over a hundred noble estates, the kingdom’s treasury would already have collapsed. The wealth recovered from the nobles was in no way infinite, and as proof of this, the great enemy even sent a letter.

I knew it was impossible to send more troops to the front line; we had to somehow stop the imperial army with only the forces we now had. We had to stop the thirty-one legions approaching the border with our fifteen legions containing many conscripts. It might not be easy, but considering that we had the advantage of the defense, it wasn’t impossible.

In fact, despite the overwhelming inferiority of our allied troops, they have been guarding the borders so far. But at best, we would be able to endure it for one or two years. It is the kingdom that would eventually be defeated in a war of attrition. It was as Malcoy said: The Empire was at peace, except for the few provinces that have become battlefields, unlike Leonberg, where everything has been reorganized for war.

“The kingdom has to extend the frontline somehow and make the Empire bleed instead,” Malcoy continued, speaking in a casual tone. “Fortunately, there are things that count in the kingdom’s favor and not in the Empire’s. The Royal Army moves with a singular purpose, whereas the Imperial Army does not. Their legion commanders each belong to different factions – they each have different political positions.”

Malcoy had served for quite a long time as an Imperial Legion Commander, so he knew the Imperial Army’s ills better than anyone. The legion commanders – belonging to different factions – constantly checked on each other, and it was said that in severe cases, two factions might enter open conflict within a single legion.

“That’s the Empire’s blind spot that the kingdom must dig into.”

The point of the operation was to create a situation where enemy commanders at cross-purposes moved their legions separately. That was also part of our forces’ mission who infiltrated the enemy’s rear: To disengage the legion commanders attached to the border offensive from the front.

What remained now was to divide the enemy’s twenty or so legions, but Malcoy already had plans for that. He asked me to wait and let the results speak for themselves, but merely waiting didn’t suit my temper – especially when my men had to infiltrate the enemy camp and perform dangerous missions. I wanted to draw my sword and head to the battlefield.

Of course, I couldn’t. Malcoy didn’t want me to charge out of the citadel.

“The members of the Leonberger family will be at too great a risk.”

“The Dotrin royal family are easier about it.”

When I mentioned the Dotrin royal family heading to the Empire’s mainland, Malcoy laughed.

“You must be kidding,” he said with an expression full of cynicism. “The people who benefit the most from the war against the Leonberg Kingdom are the people of Dotrin. Due to the Empire’s attention being focused on your kingdom, Dotrin’s territory remains safe.”

Malcoy opined that the King of Dotrin was very clever.

“You speak of the Knights of the Sky? The same counts for them. You may think they are helping Leonberg, but the reality is that they are borrowing your kingdom’s troops for their own. It can be said that Dotrin is engaging in a proxy war by fielding only one knight squadron. Leonberg is being used.”

I shrugged at Malcoy’s bitter words, knowing that he was not wrong. It was true that Dotrin has entered the war with only the Sky Knights. One reason for this was that Dotrin’s forests were occupied by the Full Moon Clan and their Plague Lord, making it impossible for troops to advance overland. Of course, if Dotrin wanted to send troops, they could find a way.

Nevertheless, Malcoy’s interpretation was overkill. It was natural, as Malcoy did not know about the Sky Blade and the family of the storm, so to him, the Sky Knights were nothing more than knights with a special means of transportation in the form of the wyvern.

Contrary to Malcoy’s conception, the Sky Knights couldn’t be dismissed as being a single squadron. Individually, they were outstanding warriors, and their mobility was the greatest of any force on the continent. The King of Dotrin that led them here was a real monster who could steam many enemy knights on his own. If you wanted to represent the full force of the Sky Knights, I valued them at three legions and at least a Penta Knight. However, even after giving examples and explaining the never-encountered Penta Knights to Malcoy, my words did not reach him. He hurriedly responded to me, coming up with another topic of conversation.

“I am mostly concerned about what the emperor’s intention is.”

Malcoy expressed concern that it was easy for the emperor to deploy all the Empire’s divided legions to a single purpose. He went on to say that he couldn’t figure out why the emperor hadn’t yet employed his own power to aid imperial efforts.

Malcoy’s question made sense; I also knew of the emperor’s abilities. I guessed that the situation was not as the emperor had intended, however. Malcoy asked what the basis of my speculation was.

“Wait. It will become clear when the rangers who have gone out on reconnaissance return.”

And as the day passed, the rangers who had scouted came back.

“It is said that the commander-in-chief of the enemy is of the direct line of the Burgundy imperial family.”

“Which number is he?”

“At this time, I don’t know. Perhaps it’s because of concerns about the Wyvern Knights’ raids, or maybe because he didn’t hoist his flags.”

As I heard the ranger’s report, I immediately sent Jordan to determine the princeps’ identity.

I knew him to be a keen-eyed ranger, and because he had been to the imperial capital with me, he could tell which princeps it was just by looking at him from a distance. Jordan returned soon afterward, and the ranger’s expression was brighter than before. As I looked at his face, my heart started to thud, as if it had heard the good news about the good news.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s him,” Jordan replied with a grin, saying it’s the one I had been waiting for.

I laughed; it was such a nice thing to hear.

“Who the hell is he?” Malcoy asked with a frown, not understanding the conversation between me and Jordan.

“The hope of all who are against the Empire,” I answered.

He was the princeps of the Burgundy imperial family, who had commanded the offensive against Dotrin through the forest. This was a man pampered to such an extent that he avoided all possible physical injury.

“The greatest sample of incompetence and greed,” I added.

“Surely…” Malcoy muttered as he looked at me, comprehending the situation.

I quietly showed three of my fingers.

“That’s right. It is the third princeps.”

The imperial disaster that has been fostered over the years. Now was the moment when he would finally appear on the battlefield against Leonberg.

How nice to meet you.

CHAPTER 196
LIGHT A FIRE (2)

“A few years ago, I would have agreed in saying that the third princeps is the epitome of incompetence and greed. However, considering the skills the third princeps has revealed in the war with Dotrin, he can’t possibly be regarded as incompetent.”

It didn’t take Malcoy long to challenge my opinion after he learned who the enemy’s commander-in-chief was.

“The imperial nobles greatly appreciate the possibility that the third princeps has been hiding his abilities, waiting to bear them up until now. I agree with their opinion on him.”

Malcoy emphasized that the princeps was one of the most promising candidates for succession to the imperial throne, saying that I would not know of this because I am not an imperial.

“If, as past rumors go, the third princeps was such a greedy and incompetent idiot, he would never have been able to make such a great contribution in the war against Dotrin.”

Malcoy repeatedly warned me to pay heed to the third princeps.

“Your Highness wasn’t there, so it might not impress you. However, as a participant in the Dotrin invasion, I can say that it was no easy task to retreat to the mainland by marshaling all the troops after the occupied fortresses have collapsed, and while Dotrin’s forces were counterattacking.”

When I didn’t pay attention to Malcoy’s warnings, he sighed and started sharing his painful memories.

“Of the thirty or so legions of the Empire that invaded Dotrin, only the third princeps’ army became aware of the collapsing fortresses in advance. They did not suffer much damage and defeated Dotrin’s persistent pursuit, recovered other troops safely, and finally reached the mainland.”

Malcoy had spoken a whole lot up to this point, and his expression seemed to implore me that it would be worthwhile to be alert about the third princeps. Rather than being vigilant, I was on the verge of laughing.

“At his level, it should be said that the princeps has proved his ability to the extent of a true general.”

The third princeps didn’t just make mistakes; he made them over a long time. He never proved anything; he merely ate what I fed him.

“There is no way that the Dotrin Kingdom could have failed to notice the position of the third princeps,” added Malcoy, and this time his words were close to the facts. The Dotrin Royal Army fought while observing the circumstances of the third princeps from start to finish. When they harried his forces, they kept a proper distance so the princeps could save face. When the fort was destroyed, the third princeps was informed in advance so that he could avoid the collapse.

Even when Dotrin launched a frenzied attack on the imperial forces retreating from the front, they merely pretended to chase the third princeps’ army, though never launching a proper assault.

I explained all these circumstances to Malcoy.

“How did you do that?”

Of course, he didn’t readily believe me.

“It’s because I was also there. At that time, I was not a prince but a mercenary.”

Malcoy’s eyes eventually widened, and the surprise was evident on his face as he heard the strange words flowing from me. Malcoy’s reaction wasn’t that strange. It would’ve been weirder if it was easy to believe that the successor to the throne of one country cheated by fighting as a mercenary in another country’s war. I picked up the sword I had placed on the council room table.

‘A soldier, he dies, and becomes six silver coins

A knight, he dies, and becomes thirty coins of gold

Victory is nothing but an honor

And only in my death-filled hall

Will there ever be truth'

Within my mind, I recited the dance poem of the mercenary king, the one I had sung night and day on the frontlines of Dotrin. Malcoy looked at me blankly, confused, not knowing why I had suddenly drawn my sword.

I injected mana into my sword, making sure Malcoy had the blade in sight.

'Pwa~'

A yellowish light burst across the blade.

"High Seabreeze Fortress. Sword Master of the Golden Aura Blade."

"Hut!" Malcoy exclaimed as his head twitched back in surprise, his eyes wide as he understood the meaning of my words.

"Is your Highness the leader of the Veil Mercenary Company, Ian?"

"Veil was the title of the person dearest to me, and Ian was the nickname he used to call me."

I gave a light chuckle as I shortly summarized all I had done in Dotrin.

"I was also the Swordmaster of Dotrin who captured the third princeps. I was the collaborator who helped the princeps escape. I imprinted the weaknesses of High Seabreeze Fortress into his mind countless times so that the stupid third princeps would not forget them while escaping in terror."

I happily laughed when I saw Malcoy look at me, his mouth agape.

"Because the princeps was so stupid, he couldn't eat what he was given, so I had to force the knowledge down his throat."

Malcoy had stared blankly at me as I told him this; he now spoke.

"Then the original rumors are true? The third princeps is an incompetent and greedy idiot."

Malcoy reorganized the current situation based on the facts I told him.

“The reason you increased the third princeps’ prestige by driving him toward greater success was to confuse the Empire by making the incompetent princeps the most powerful candidate for succession to the throne.”

Malcoy even quickly identified the intentions I hadn’t told him of. He didn’t figure out that I had purposes other than confusing the Empire, however. My desires were far greater: I hoped that the third princeps would become the emperor of the Burgundy Empire. I expected that his uncommon, disastrous nature would fully bloom and the Millennium Empire would collapse without leaving a cornerstone standing.

I clearly remembered the moment I had first met the third princeps.

It was a time when I had felt small, faced with the true power of the Empire as I crossed over its vast territories and through its prosperous cities. It was a time when a part of me believed that the Empire’s overwhelming national power would not collapse. Then, the third princeps appeared before me like a ray of starlight in the dark.

I was actually blinking at the time as if again seeing the arrogant and unscrupulous idiot prince of Leonberg before me. The princeps’ sloppy traits floated above his head.

[—][Nobleman] [Self-Confident] [Greedy] [Reckless] [Horny] [Violent][—]

The traits informing me of his trashy nature didn’t even catch my eye. An imperial princeps was born on top of the world and would be prone to be greedy, and it seemed natural that he did not know moderation. It must have been the same for Prince Adrian Leonberger, who was a ruined soul as well. What I noticed weren’t the traits of the princeps’ personality, but something more innate to his temperament. Something that couldn’t be changed by anything.

For example, it was like the characteristics of Adelia’s [War Mania] and [Butcher].

In truth, the princeps’ trait was so terrible that it made [War Mania] seem cute.

[Deathbringer]; the third princeps was born with the fate of a slayer. Since ancient times, those born with [Deathbringer] fell into two classes: Either they destroyed themselves by going mad on their own or destroyed their surroundings by

committing many forms of evil.

The former persons belonged to the class that was incompetent enough to be unable to do evil in the world, while the latter belonged to the class that destroyed the world around them because of their skill. The third princeps, as I knew him, definitely fell into the former category.

He was born with the trait of [Deathbringer] but lacked any talent. He had even been unable to win the competition between the principes; he was trash that could easily be eliminated, trash that could only harass his subordinates without cultivating the grander traits within them. He would end up dying alone, causing his own demise.

I had no intention of watching the third princeps self-destruct. He was a human resource rare in this world, and he was born into the Empire! I would not let his birth be in vain. What would be worse than that? I could never let it happen, never let him go to waste.

If necessary, I would give him another ability to replace his lack of talent. I decided to talk to the third princeps if I happened to see him. It was fortunate that he was not the disaster of an ordinary family or the fool of a noble family. The third princeps also had another terrible trait, just as terrible as [Deathbringer].

[Destroyer] made the princeps the incarnation of entropy, of breakdown, giving him the excellent ability to destroy all things that are fine. And that such a man was the direct blood descendant of the Burgundy family, with rights to succession!

The third princeps now had enough justification and history to hold onto his power and make up for the lowly qualities and incompetence inherent to his body.

All he ever needed was a triumph and a good reputation, and in the war with Dotrin, his reputation had reached the point of overflowing. Now I just had to wait – we just had to wait for the moment when his disastrous traits bloomed. It will be a sublime pleasure to look forward to, to see whether [Deathbringer] or [Destroyer] would bloom first. If they bloom all at once, like Adelia's traits in the past, it would be even better. While I thought about the third princeps for a while, Malcoy seemed to have put his thoughts in order. He was staring at me.

His gaze was strange, and it felt familiar somehow.

"To think that your Highness was the Swordmaster who played an active part on the

Dotrin front."

It was like…

"Countless imperial knights and wizards retreated, speaking of a lone warrior they had faced."

Malcoy's gaze was like how I looked at Jordan.

"And the same Swordmaster who was laughed at for proclaiming himself a one-man legion finally proved the truth of his words."

The way Malcoy looked at me felt as if he was watching for something to scold me about. I wasn't an infantry commander like Jordan, who had to be kept in line. I was the imposing Crown Prince of the kingdom, who had appointed Malcoy as a new member of my staff, and he dared look at me with such a scrutinizing gaze?

"It's time to adjust all your operations," I told Malcoy, and he suddenly looked at me with a gleaming face. "What I ask might be hard, but modify your plans so that we can gain some face for the third princeps."

"How much should we offer up just to make him look good?" Malcoy asked, readily understanding my request.

I thought for a moment before answering.

"It would be appropriate if it's a victory away from the main strongpoints on the border. If necessary, you can give up a small fort or citadel. In no case should Leonberg's soldiers die in vain."

"It's difficult. Defeat, but don't let the soldiers die."

"Also, don't forget that we should be able to take the victory back from the Imperial Army several times over later."

"You're creating an increasingly difficult order. Is there anything else I should have in mind?"

I gave the most important command without hesitating.

“The third princeps’ safety must be ensured in all cases.”

Malcoy gave me an absurd look as he heard this, finding it ludicrous that the enemy’s commander-in-chief was an asset to the allies.

“It is not easy to implement it just because you wish it. Will those who are imperial principes and commanders even be exposed to danger in the first place?”

Hearing Malcoy dismiss my request as if it was insignificant, I told him again.

“The third princeps must be saved.”

“I know. The third princeps will not be hurt in any case.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“If anyone hears us now, they will think Leonberg has won the war. You’re already trying to save the enemy’s commander-in-chief.”

Malcoy hurriedly pointed out my impatience, but I didn’t care. I knew that it was common sense to say that the third princeps, commander-in-chief, and candidate for the succession to the imperial throne, would not easily be injured or directly damaged on the battlefield.

The princeps was beyond common sense, however. He had already been taken prisoner in Dotrin, and I swear that neither I nor Dotrin’s forces intended to do so. It would have looked unnatural to let the defeated guy go, so I was forced to take him prisoner. Dotrin’s commanders were quite annoyed, as they were forced to modify plans that had already been established.

Of course, if it happened just once, you could chalk it up to an accident brought on by the zeal and motivation of a young princeps. However, that wasn’t the only time that the third princeps had exposed himself to danger.

If someone were to ask me what my most difficult moment was on the frontlines of the Domed Kingdom, I would answer without hesitation that every moment that the third princeps appeared on the battlefield was the most challenging.

The third princeps put himself into the path of dangers that he could not counter as if he had wanted to die. I had to run around like crazy so that the princeps was not

killed by knights and soldiers who knew nothing of his value. And this without letting my allies or enemies understand what I was doing. I had to make the princeps avoid being killed or injured by a blind arrow or blade so that he could set up his reputation and leave the frontline intact.

So, I protected the third princeps throughout the first invasion. It was through fortune that he did not enter direct battle in the second invasion. If I had to keep up with the princeps in the forest, I wouldn't have been able to stand it anymore, and I might have killed him.

It had been a very strange scenario. A lot of terrified men died in that forest, like ghosts, yet the princeps survived. I decided to warn Malcoy again.

"Malcoy. By all means, it is nice to hope that the last two wars have made the third princeps more careful."

He might have changed so much that he now chose to protect himself behind a strong shield rather than being as reckless as his former self. Either way, I hoped he wouldn't be as wild as a thunderbolt in this war.

Unfortunately, my wishes were denied far too quickly. It happened when the enemy's main force had not yet reached our position; on the day when I secretly exited the citadel with a handful of knights, Percival included, to intercept enemy scouts who had crossed the border.

The third princeps was among those reconnaissance units that we targeted.

"I cannot turn away."

I sighed, for I couldn't ignore it; pretend that I had not seen them. The reason was that the princeps' companions were very attractive prey: Five wizards, one paladin, and many pretty good knights. If we left them like this, they would cause harm to numerous of our allies.

I thought about it over and over again, but the answer had been determined from the beginning.

"The reason why the emperor did not remove the incompetent princeps, who might become a nuisance later, is because he obviously expected his son to be short-lived. Because he has the talent to find the place of his own death," I mumbled, sighed, and

then instructed the knights, who readied themselves to spring the ambush.

“Ready for battle.”

The knights silently pulled out crossbows as they heard my order. And at that moment, the enemy’s scouting unit, which had been approaching unsuspectingly, stopped. The paladin stepped in front of the princeps. He must have halted the ranks after he noticed signs of our ambush.

‘Pwoo~’

A wave of energy, different in nature from that of knights, materialized. One moment later, a translucent membrane appeared and covered the front of the reconnaissance unit.

It was a magical shield created by the wizards.

“The element of surprise is gone,” I noted.

Percival nodded at me.

“Shall we back down from this, then? The paladin and five wizards are already poised, as well as the regular knights. It will not be easy to face their power from the front- Your Highness?”

Percival’s words were already behind my back after I raised my lowered body.

The energy of the imperial scouting unit vibrated when they saw me. The wizards coldly laughed as they touched their lips while the paladin had a serious look about him as he blocked the princeps’ front.

“Kill all the knights and wizards,” I ordered.

I was looking at the idiot, who always searched for a place to die. He was staring around himself, not knowing what the situation was, with a face that looked as if he found the entire scenario to be a petty game. He didn’t even know that he was the prey and we the predators.

“I’ll let that stupid guy live and then look for a chance to let him escape again.”

I charged across the ground as I aimed my body toward the third princeps.

‘Bwshaak!’

At that very moment, flames created by the wizards, as wells as ice, snow, and thunderbolts, poured towards me at once.

I slashed my sword toward the mana storm without hesitating.

CHAPTER 197
LIGHT A FIRE (3)

I deflected the lightning bolt that thundered my way. I cut through the flames that wished only to devour. The spear of snow and ice flying at my heart was smashed into fragments mid-air.

I looked at the wizards behind the translucent barrier. Whether white, distorted in pain, or with eyes so wide that they almost tore from their sockets – each wizard had a different facial expression, but the emotions welling up from them were the same: Embarrassment and surprise.

They had never expected how easily and how many times their magic would be destroyed. But what could I do about that? There were still many surprises left. I sliced my sword from top to bottom.

'Qshcuap!'

The shield woven by magic tore apart like a paper sheet. As the mana fragments scattered, the pale wizards all cried out, "Paladin!"

Through their pleasant screams came a sound like a snake's flickering tongue. At the same moment, three lines of energy flashed out, three strikes of an Aura Blade. I had already dodged away, coming to a standstill before an old wizard, the only one among the five who had not yet manifested his magic.

His deep wrinkled eyes stared at me, and they shook as if there was an earthquake. The old wizard's thick lips constantly muttered as his two hands drew complex shapes in the air. The old man was steeped in magical craft, making Ophelia and the unknown mage who attacked me in the forest look like children.

"You're a mage," I said, and the wizard flinched at my words, his lips moving quicker.

'Goo-ooh!'

A great energy wave began to sway around the old wizard, indicating that the

completion of his magic was imminent. Even if he had not yet completed his spell, with his magic not yet having revealed its shape, I was able to realize the magnitude of it immediately.

He would soon unleash magic upon the world so powerful that it was incomparable to lesser spells. The flames, ice, and lightning of the other wizards had just been a diversion. The translucent barrier had merely been a safety mechanism to buy time.

The real thing was the old mage's magic. I didn't know its form, but I knew that the entire area would turn into hell once he unleashed his magic. The mana stored by the old man had the power to do so. Unfortunately, there was no way for me to discover the nature of the mage's magic. The old wizard's spell was left unfinished forever.

"I'm sorry."

The wizard's head was separated from his body, rolling over the ground.

'Kurruroong~'

The mana that the mage had gathered up to that moment shook…

'Dwaang!'

…and it exploded.

* * *

The battle ended swiftly, with the aftermath of the explosion neutralizing the imperial wizards. They all collapsed before our swords, their resistance futile.

The imperial paladin and knights resisted fiercely, but they only bought themselves a little time.

The shock of the explosion stunned the paladin, throwing him away from the third princeps. Percival stabbed him, with the paladin not getting the chance for a proper fight. The imperial knights were all beheaded by our knights and me.

It was an unbelievable battle, considering that it had included a paladin and a mage. The way things played out, all their power had existed in vain. If this were a proper

battle, these powerful men would have left countless of Leonberg's knights and soldiers bleeding out. However, they had not been given a chance to use the might of their minds and bodies properly. They all became corpses stretched out upon the ground.

All who survived was the foolish third princeps.

"There are no injuries. It seems he just passed out. So, it's okay to assume that he'll be sleeping for a while," Percival reported to me after confirming the status of the princeps.

It was as Percival said: I heard his soft breath when I listened intently.

Even if all his talented protectors had been wiped out at once, the princeps was far too easygoing, napping like that. I was disgusted.

Still, it was far better to have the third princeps in such a state. If he had been awake, it would have been a real headache trying to keep him under control. In that situation, the princeps would not have known what to do, considering that he had voluntarily declared me to be his brother.

So, it was ideal that he was unaware of my presence and my capability.

Of course, even if unconscious, he was still giving me a headache. It had certainly been a pleasure to smash a dent in the Empire's power, taking a paladin and a mage, but the question now was how to get the princeps back to his camp. Leaving him just as he was would make the entire situation seem unnatural. Waiting for the imperial reinforcements to come to his rescue and giving him away was not an option because we did not know how long it would take.

Fortunately, Percival came up with a solution.

Since his soldiers are from the Empire, they would be perfect, acting like a surviving band of troops coming to the princeps' rescue. If they pretended to fight with us and forced the princeps to make his dramatic escape, the imperial army would believe that a group of soldiers who had remained on the front had sacrificed themselves to save the princeps. I couldn't think of another way on the spot, so I decided to follow Percival's plan.

"Well, now, we wait."

Percival had left for the citadel, and while we waited for him to return with his former soldiers, the third princeps groaned. If I left him like that, he would wake up, so I slammed the flat of my blade against his head. He passed out again with a yelp.

“Huh?”

I tilted my head as I looked at the unconscious man. The moment my blade had hit the back of his neck, an unknown energy had touched my sword. It was strange; I knew his mana reserve was scant, barely that of an apprentice knight. The energy I had felt in that short moment of contact was several times fiercer than that.

I used my power of [Judging] in any case, and my eyes almost fell out.

[—]Apostle of the Full Moon[—]

A trait I had never seen before was clearly displayed on the princeps’ character screen. It was something I knew well: Those bizarre beings, neither human nor beast, that we had encountered in Dotrin’s forests. They were ferocious hunters who spread their mutating plague. [Apostle of the Full Moon] was a title that described one-half of the Plague Lord’s followers.

“You? You’re infected?”

It was not difficult to guess where the third prince had caught the full moon plague. The forests of Dotrin, within which both of us had stayed at for a while, had become a territory ruled by the full moon clan. And now, a man born with the innate traits of [Deathbringer] and [Destroyer] was also an [Apostle of the Full Moon].

It was absurd rather than surprising, and it felt far more amazing than merely being absurd. When a full moon plague strikes, nine out of ten victims die during their transformation, with only one surviving to become a half-man. And only about one in a hundred of those who had completely transformed become apostles, gaining savagery and vitality.

In terms of probability, the princeps’ transformation was a very rare case, with the odds being one to a thousandth against. The fool before me had been reborn as an [Apostle of the Full Moon] against all odds. Is there anything as sublime as this in the world?

I looked at the princeps in detail once again, and I found out that, embarrassingly, he

had only gained a single of the numerous abilities of an apostle. He didn't have the hunter's [Tenacity], nor the predator's [Wildness]. The princeps did not have the [Toughness] of the full moon warriors, and neither did he have the [Ferocity] of the half-men.

The only trait he had was the [Vitality of the Plague Lord]. It meant that his wounds could heal quickly and that he had a lifespan twice as long as normal humans.

For the third princeps to live on while the probability was against him, to become a [Apostle of the Full Moon], only for him to gain the single ability of [Vitality of the Plague Lord] – I wasn't sure if I should call that lucky or unfortunate.

After thinking about it for a while, I reached a conclusion.

"This is good."

It was an end to my worries about the blitzing guy blindly getting himself killed by a sword-thrust on the battlefield. Anyone who posses [Vitality of the Plague Lord] would not easily die under the bite of a blade. Still, just to be sure, I decided to try it out.

I drew twilight and cut into his forearm.

'Plluchgk~'

White froth rose from the long cut as it quickly healed. As I looked at his white, scarless skin, I gave a satisfied laugh. The kingdom's hope had grown stronger; the Empire's disaster was mightier than before. It wasn't bad at all. I conducted several more tests on the third princeps' body until Percival returned with dozens of men. They were all soldiers from Malcoy's legion, who had been Leonberg's prisoners up to a while ago.

As we had discussed in advance, we created the appropriate scuffs and traces to simulate a battlefield.

"Let's start."

Once we were done, we immediately began our mock battle. Of course, it would be useless if we thought for a hundred days straight, so we woke up the third princeps…

‘Pwak!’…in a rather drastic manner.

“Eh?”

Just like a true [Apostle of the Full Moon], the princeps quickly shook off the shock of the blow.

“Your Highness! Run away! We will buy time!” Percival cried out to the princeps, who watched the battle in a haze. Percival’s imperial language was pure, leaving no doubt about his allegiance.

“You!” the princeps gasped.

“Now is not the time for leisurely introductions! Come on, get out of here! We will guard your Highness’s retreat with our deaths!” Percival exclaimed fiercely.

The third princeps’ face hardened for an instant. It seemed that even in such a situation, Percival’s direct tone annoyed the princeps. The stupid princeps did at least realize that getting away from the fight was his first priority, so he soon turned around and started running.

He didn’t run in the direction of imperial territory, however. He ran in the direction of Leonberg’s citadel. Some of Percival’s soldiers got a hold of the princeps and gave him proper directions. They didn’t forget to play the part of getting struck down by our blades after that.

“I will remember you!” the third princeps shouted in an excited voice as he stopped running and turned around. He then fled without a backward glance. As we stared at his back, we continued to mimic the sounds of battle, striking our blades against each other ineffectually. We soon stopped.

“The things I have to do to win a war,” I muttered as a sense of embarrassment came upon us. We glanced at each other and swiftly returned to the citadel after sheathing our swords.

Once there, I told Malcoy about the situation. He was greatly astonished, saying he had not expected the third princeps to conduct a dangerous scouting mission directly.

“I told you. The guy is an idiot.”

Malcoy was somewhat troubled by the presence of the third presence so near our lines and said that such reckless behavior was bound to lead the man into a fatal accident. I didn't want to let Malcoy worry too much, so I provided him with some good news.

"Don't worry about it. He's not going to die anymore."

Malcoy was amazed when I told him about the princeps' new abilities. His wonderment lasted only a while, for he soon began to devise new ways in which to use the 'kingdom's hope' to strengthen our position.

"I will make the princeps a hero," said Malcoy. "Our worries about him getting fatally wounded have disappeared."

"Tread gently. It will be a big deal if he does die," I warned Malcoy, just in case. When I made to leave the council room, Malcoy stopped me.

"By the way, now that your Highness has noticed it, isn't it a matter of time before the emperor knows what happened to the third princeps' body?"

I nodded. Although the emperor did not have my power of checking people's traits, he was a man who possessed great insight when it came to studying others. The emperor would easily notice the nasty changes occurring in the body of his son.

"The emperor doesn't care if the third princeps becomes a dog or a half-man."

I was not worried about the emperor knowing, and it was more of a certainty than a vague feeling.

After facing the emperor in his capital – after being under his gaze and against his energy for a few days, it was the conclusion I had reached. I had confirmed his disposition.

"I don't know if it's due to his basic nature, but the emperor seemed to view the succession as irrelevant."

If it hadn't been so, then I would have had no reason not to defeat the third princeps, who would surely become a fire raging through the Empire in the future.

"Maybe so," said Malcoy. "We can say that it's a competition, then. The emperor keeps

encouraging his sons to challenge each other so that one can rise above the rest."

Malcoy admitted that my viewpoint made sense. However, it wasn't the emperor's obscure intentions that we had to be concerned about, but rather the immediacy of the war. Shortly after the third princeps ran for the hills, the imperial legions crossed Leonberg's borders.

Battles were fought everywhere. Arwen and Eli raged like crazy toward the Empire's mainland while the Imperial Army ripped into the kingdom's territory.

Meanwhile, the cold season was gradually drawing to an end – and spring finally came.

"Your Highness! Some Sky Knights who left with the Eastern Fleet are back!"

Spring began with an extraordinary rapidity this year, strolling shyly out of winter like a fresh-faced girl, much like a timid boy.

CHAPTER 198
LIGHT A FIRE (4)

I promptly got up from my seat. If I waited, I knew the Wyvern Knights would come to me, but I had no intention of sitting around until they found me.

“Guide me. I’ll go to them.”

I left the council room right away, following the messenger.

“What is their status?”

“It seems that both the wyverns and their riders are tired, as if they flew here non-stop, your Highness. But the knights’ faces weren’t dark.”

I sighed in relief. Fortunately, it didn’t seem as if a great loss had occurred.

“Didn’t they tell you what happened to his Majesty and the Eastern Fleet?”

“Before they touched down completely, I ran to get your Highness,” the messenger replied with some regret. “If your Highness meets them in person, you will know. There is no sorrow on their faces.”

I hurried my steps, then, and it wasn’t long before we reached the citadel’s courtyard.

“Ah.”

The mighty wyverns had their long tongues out as they panted. The Sky Knights leaned against the side of their wyverns, their eyes closed. Among them was Jin Katrin, the young vice-commander of the Sky Knights. They all looked like horsemen who had ridden hard, beset by fatigue.

“Your-”

“Shh.”

When I saw that the soldiers wanted to pay me the proper courtesy, I put my finger to my mouth.

“Don’t make a fuss.”

After speaking, I quietly looked at the condition of the Wyvern Knights. They were stretched out against their mounts, so very tired. Seeing the proud aerial knights hanging their heads before soldiers from another country told me just how exhausted they were.

“They wanted to take a break before reporting to your Highness. They’ve been like this ever since,” said the citadel commander apologetically as he took an awkward look at the Sky Knights.

“They’re exhausted. I don’t know, but they must’ve flown across the continent.”

I gave a small nod and turned to look at Jin Katrin and the Wyvern Knights for a while.

“Send for me later, when they wake up,” I ordered.

“Your Highness came this far, waiting for a while to hear their report-”

“If the news of the war had been grim, they would have reported it to my face and then collapsed. They would not have taken time to rest.”

I knew that they would not have considered resting if they had come here as defeated warriors.

Even if the Wyvern Knights seemed exhausted enough to faint on the spot, their mood didn’t look that bad. The unshakable anxiety I had felt after our allied fleet left for the Empire’s mainland was now much diluted. There was no reason for me not to be patient for a while.

I went back to the council room and waited for the Sky Knights to awaken. Jin Katrin found me there not long after I had left the courtyard.

“Your Highness.”

The knight had not been able to relieve his fatigue completely, but his expression

was bright.

After seeing his face, the stress and worry that had remained within me disappeared. I became very relaxed.

“It seems that you were in such a hurry to come here that you fell asleep without seeing me coming or going.”

“I didn’t fall asleep. I just closed my eyes for a moment to organize the report for your Highness in my head.”

“You were snoring.”

“No way. I’ve never heard anyone tell me I snore in my entire life.”

“First wipe the drool from your mouth, then talk.”

As Jin heard this, he wiped his mouth and coughed. He then quickly corrected his posture.

“I, Jin Katrin of the Dotrin Kingdom, vice-commander of the Knights of the Sky, give my report. I flew day and night to deliver the news of our allied forces.”

I also straightened my posture and waited for him to continue talking.

“I will tell you the conclusion first,” Jin said as he looked at me. “We have won more than was expected.”

My hands felt on fire as I heard this, but instead of delighting, I looked at Jin and touched my lips. There was news I wanted to hear more eagerly about than the war, but my mouth could not speak the words. When Jin Katrin saw me looking at him like that, he smiled gently and said, “Leonberg’s monarch is safe.”

“Ah,” I uttered an ambiguous sound, neither groan nor delighted sigh. I had thought that there was no more anxiety left in me, but that wasn’t the case. Only then did my heart unclench and relax.

“Is there a more detailed report?” I asked energetically to hide my feelings. Jin looked at me with a knowing face, and I pretended not to see his smile.

“The fleet sailed south as planned and made call in one of Dotrin’s ports. There they joined up with three of Dotrin’s legions who were ready to campaign, and sailed for the imperial mainland.”

The status of the fleet, unknown to me, began to flow from Jin’s mouth. I listened quietly. There were so many things I wanted to ask him, but I chose not to interrupt his tale.

“The original plan was to land at one Dotrin’s old, ruined fortresses, sailing past the shores bordered by the forest and heading on from there. But during the voyage, the two monarchs held head-to-head meetings and revised the plan.”

I had planned to listen to the end, but that notion quickly faded because the decision of the two kings far exceeded my expectations.

“They, therefore, went further west than originally planned, sailing until it was full moon and landing in the southern part of the Empire. In the area adjacent to Hwaryong’s territory.”

“Why the hell would they do such a dangerous thing?” I wanted to know.

“The first reason was that the Empire has all but lost control over much of the area bordering Hwaryong’s territory. It would be safer for the allied forces to operate from there. The second reason was that they could easily march east from there.”

It was a reasonable strategy and offered them a pretty good advantage. The existence of Hwaryong was intimidating for a reason, however. The advantage of avoiding enemy scrutiny and operating outside of imperial influence was paltry compared to the threat of the dragon. Hwaryong’s realm wasn’t formed along the lines of human borders. If a single person accidentally entered the fire dragon’s territory, Leonberg and Dotrin’s armies could have been annihilated before launching a proper attack on the Empire.

When I pointed this out, Jin Katrin responded as if he had expected me to do so.

“When we first encountered the fire dragon, our wyverns refused to fly because of its presence. They recovered after a while, but that doesn’t mean that they have forgotten that peculiar smell. Unless the wyverns forget the imprint of Hwaryong’s scent, they won’t accidentally enter its territory.”

Jin Katrin had alleviated my concerns and continued his report.

“Anyway, we landed there and started marching north right away.”

They destroyed the noble families adjacent to the southern territory in a day. They razed several major strongholds and burned down many warehouses. The imperial troops that put up a sporadic resistance were destroyed in succession.

It was a total victory. Thanks to the forces already swept away by Hwaryong, many families of great lords were no more. These families were the ones who would’ve protected the central region from invasion, so those imperial forces remaining collapsed without offering much resistance.

Of course, the Empire didn’t just sit back and watch as the armies of two nations penetrated deep into its mainland. The central region’s great lords were ordered to act by the imperial family, and headed south with their own troops to salvage the devastating situation.

The imperial troops that massed together numbered about twenty legions. I had fought against the Empire countless times and knew what dire potential such a force had.

Nevertheless, Leonberg and Dotrin’s forces were not defeated.

“The odds became unfavorable, so it proved wise to pull our body of troops toward Hwaryong’s territory.”

The Imperial Army was bound by imperial decree not to stimulate the fire dragon, and the ability of the Wyvern Knights to know of the dragon’s presence fit the situation perfectly.

Even with its great power, the result was that the Imperial Army could do nothing against the five legions that moved around the Empire. Their goal became urgent defense rather than pursuit.

It certainly did help our forces, but the plan didn’t sound very attractive to me.

“If the enemy went insane and entered the fire dragon’s territory, its wrath would not have been limited to the Imperial Army,” I stated. Hwaryong didn’t care what banners an army hoisted.

If something invades its territory, it burns it into nothingness. Anything offensive to the dragon's sight would be destroyed in the process. That is Hwaryong.

"Our allied army split into groups. Even if the moment came when the fire dragon went mad, we could reduce the damage."

Jin told me that the two kings operated with such a situation in mind. I wasn't sure whether to judge their plan as outrageous or reckless.

"Both the soldiers and knights of Dotrin could not stop admiring the resolve of Leonberg's nobles."

I looked at Jin Katrin, not sure what he was talking about.

"There were times when imperial troops violated imperial command and pursued our forces, forced to do so by their commanders. Each time, the nobles who went with your father came out. They provoked the Imperial Army every time, luring them closer to Hwaryong's territory, camping near its borders."

Jin said that the imperial army, infuriated by such outright provocation, eventually fell back without daring to catch up with the nobles.

"The nobles of Leonberg did that?"

"Yeah. The Imperial Army was suppressed in that manner, with the nobles prepared to face annihilation, almost provoking the dragon to rise."

I laughed as I heard that. I now understood how the situation had unfolded.

All of Leonberg's loyalists, except for the champions and the king's closest comrades, had remained behind in the kingdom. The nobles who had followed the king into the war had barely escaped execution as traitors, and they were not men of good quality.

They had the courage to sell out their country, but not the determination to die for it. They were nothing. Persons like them would not have willingly held a dangerous position, facing annihilation from the enemy. They probably didn't know the truth of the situation, and the imperial forces couldn't dare to fight with them properly, so near to the dragon. The imperials were forced back, knowing it was not worth trying to swallow the bait.

Personally, I would not have humored the traitor nobles; it was like keeping a pet volcano, never knowing when lava will erupt right next to me. Now I understood why the king dared to drag them along with him, though. He had told me that the kingdom could collapse if we cut off all the corrupted parts at once, and we both knew that the traitors' blood relatives were trying to dedicate themselves to Leonberg with new hearts.

It seemed that the king never intended to save these nobles in the first place. Why else would he have dragged all those unhelpful aristocrats after him? Perhaps he intended to abandon them in the Empire. It was a really good idea.

It is ten million times better for those who are to die anyway to leave their children with the pride of having lost a father who died fighting for the kingdom rather than facing the shame of having their fathers executed as traitors.

"Anyway, after we fought like that, we achieved more than we expected," said Jin Katrin, taking a breath before he began to list the kills claimed by the two armies.

Five high lords – counts or greater – and twenty-four lords of smaller families, holding titles lesser than that of counts, died. Over thirty castles and strongholds had been burned down, and eleven imperial legions were destroyed or crippled. It was a terrifying kill tally by the five legions who had infiltrated into the heart of the great Empire, even taking into account the calamity the Empire faced after the fire dragon left naught but empty fields.

But in a way, it was natural. I couldn't imagine how the monstrous King of Dotrin could be defeated. He was a man who had already fully achieved [Heroic] status, and if luck was on his side, the superman would transcend further as he accumulated karma and spirit and finally reach [Mythic] level.

Knowing that fact, I felt that the number of dead imperials was rather small, considering that such a monster participated in the war.

My judgment was premature, for counts were not the only great imperial lords who were slain.

Jin Katrin laughed at me, and from his expression, it seemed that the real deal was yet to come.

"Is it possible that you killed a duke?"

Jin shook his head, making it clear that someone greater had been killed.

My eyes grew wide; only one class was greater than that of a duke: A member of the imperial family, a blood descendant with succession rights to the throne.

“When the southern count was exterminated, the First Imperial Princeps was also there.”

It wasn’t just a princeps who had been killed, but the Empire’s first princeps. This time, I was quite surprised.

“Of course, it was not easy. Paladins and mages were guarding him with their lives, and the first princeps was strong on his own.”

Jin recounted the various tribulations that occurred in the process of killing the princeps like a saga. In the end, I saw how proud Jin was: Proud of how strong Dotrin’s king is and how excellent the Sky Knights are.

I could not deny it; the first princeps’ head was proof enough.

Although the Burgundy imperial family did not adhere to the practice of letting the eldest child inherit the throne, the symbolism and authority of the first princeps could not be compared to that of other principes.

That was why the first princeps had still been seen as the strongest candidate for succession to the throne, even after the third princeps established his power in the war and gained a strong claim on the throne.

But now, the most powerful contender for succession was dead.

Laughter flowed from me. Before I went to the Empire, there had been five principes. All the strongest ones have died; only the two weakest remained. And between them, the corrupted one was currently closest to his father.

“So that idiot will truly become emperor.”

Of course, it still only remained a possibility, even if it was highly probable.

The surviving fifth princeps was also a serious contender, and if he hadn’t spent a lot of time wandering across the front lines, he would have achieved considerable

power in the capital by now.

Perhaps the fifth princeps could have absorbed the forces of his deceased brothers.

I couldn't completely rule out the possibility that the emperor, who I believed not to be interested in the succession, would counter my expectations and support the fifth princeps.

Of course, no matter how things turned out, those were matters for the distant future.

Now it was time for me to hope that our allied force, which had gone through a great deal in the Empire, returned safely. It was time to hope that Leonberg's borders would stay strong until they returned. And I also hoped that the weaker nations had gained courage from the Empire's repeated mistakes and defeats and would rise up against it outright.

Everything in this world doesn't always go the way we want it to. Sometimes what we expect to happen first happens later, and that which should have occurred eventually comes about unexpectedly.

Such was the case now.

CHAPTER 199
LIGHT A FIRE (5)

It seemed that civil war would occur in the Empire. When I first heard this, I could only laugh.

“The people who dare not breathe out loud in front of the emperor will start a civil war? That’s ridiculous.”

I would not believe it until I were to see it in person. I had already seen the emperor, and I had confirmed how much the imperial nobility feared him. Nobles who lacked the courage to look straight at the emperor would not start a civil war while his eyes remained open, no matter how confusing the internal and external politics of the Empire might be.

I considered the possibility of a civil war in preparation for the future, but when I heard no additional news on the matter, I then erased it from my mind.

“How can we give the third princeps bigger victories without losing allies?”

After repeated meetings with Malcoy, I selected several individuals and an unimportant fort, making a ‘transaction’ with the princeps. Needles to say, the exchange was made so secretly that even the third princeps did not notice the truth of it. During the course of the transaction, the Imperial Army suffered considerable damage. While the main force was distracted by the occupation of the fort, the other imperial troops on the front were greatly damaged by separate forces of Leonberg, though that was not the most important gain.

The third princeps gained a good reputation for specializing in the occupation of Leonberg’s fortresses, which the other imperial legions could not capture. We were also able to inflict considerable damage to the Imperial Army in exchange for a stronghold that was not important to me. It was a bonus of the transaction, and everything went well.

All that bothered me was that the imperial wizards and paladins on the front were too quiet.

“They have already lost one mage and one paladin. It is natural for them to be careful not to lose any more of their precious assets,” Malcoy observed.

“If they wanted to keep that which is precious safe, they could have left them all behind instead of bringing them to a dangerous battlefield. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

Malcoy shook his head at my words.

“We are speaking of knights – who are highly regarded in any country. We can’t think of them like normal soldiers when we consider the time and cost it takes to train a single knight.”

Malcoy went on to say that it was the difference between the Empire and the kingdom.

“Leonberg bet all on this war, but it is not an empire. Although they are frightened by the emperor’s strict nature, the imperial commanders will be forced to think about the post-war situation. No matter how much you want victory, there is no real benefit gained from losing your knights and other precious assets.”

“And that’s easy for you to see?”

“You should view it from the opposite side. It’s because they saw what happened to those who rushed here. They now rather wait on the sidelines,” Malcoy said, adding, “They know there are those among us who will not always spare their knights and wizards. Still, they will want to avoid being reprimanded for not aiding the war effort properly, so they will try their best at least once. And if they pool all their power, it will surely be against this citadel.”

Malcoy suggested that now was the time to prepare for battle by bringing in the Masters and knights.

“I will tell Jin Katrin and the Sky Knights.”

The Wyvern Knights had just returned from the Empire, so delivering the news was no problem.

Soon after that, changes began taking place on the front lines.

“The empire’s offensive has noticeably weakened.”

“The guys who have been beating against our walls every four days have now been looking at the castle from a distance for a week.”

“For almost all strongholds, the situation is similar.”

Malcoy predicted that the Imperial Army had begun reorganizing in order to engage in an all-out war. Malcoy and I expected that the moment the Empire finished catching a breath, a greater offensive than ever before would begin. We were wrong.

“The Imperial Army has begun to withdraw!”

Their entire army, which had advanced to Leonberg’s border, began to retreat.

And it wasn’t a retreat in which one step was taken backwards so that they could take two forward; the Imperial Army was truly pulling back. The Sky Knights scouted the battlefield and confirmed the fact.

“Why?”

No matter how much I pondered on it, there was no way to explain the imperial army’s sudden retreat. No, there was one: The rumors of an imperial civil war I had heard a while ago.

My thoughts were the same now as back then. I saw no possibility that the imperial officials, who dared not even breathe properly in front of the emperor, would start a civil war. He was a man of tremendous presence, and I did not believe he would wait for a civil war to break out in his country.

I ordered my agents to confirm the rumor’s authenticity by using all means possible so that I could gain clarity of mind.

Percival, who had joined the Imperial Army disguised as a defeated soldier, returned to the citadel a few days later.

“Your Highness! Civil war has truly broken out in the Empire!”

I frowned because I couldn’t believe it even after it had been confirmed. Percival continued to report, looking at me with a bright face.

“It was not possible to learn details because the information is limited, but it seems the fifth princeps felt threatened and decided to become a rebel!”

The moment I heard this, the situation quickly grew clear in my head. The fifth princeps had originally been the least likely to succeed to the throne, even less than the third.

The situation changed as the war continued, however.

The rival second and fourth principes were killed one after another, and even the first princeps, the most powerful candidate for succession, fell to our allied attack upon the mainland. The opportunity then came to the fifth princeps, who was never likely to gain the throne due to his brothers’ outstanding abilities and power.

However, it wasn’t only the fifth princeps who benefited from the death of the other principes in the war. No, it was the third princeps who gained the most. The imperial nobles who lost their chosen principes to the first Dotrin invasion went to fight under the third princeps’ banner to avoid the emperor’s anger. The third princeps became the most powerful contender for the throne and gained the reputation of a war hero.

And the fame he gained had come with him to the frontlines of the war with Leonberg.

With his most powerful rival, the first princeps, being dead, it was no exaggeration to say that the third princeps’ succession was almost established as a certainty. The imperial family’s future did not look bright, especially if the third princeps and his damned temper would head the Empire.

It was natural for the fifth princeps to feel a sense of crisis. In all likelihood, his brother, as emperor, would kill him under suspicious circumstances or execute him without proper charges.

The fifth princeps had motive enough for rebellion: He would do anything to survive. The reward was greater than survival, though. He would become the emperor were his revolution to succeed.

And besides, it wasn’t impossible. The third princeps had been on the fringes before becoming the most powerful candidate for succession. It took him nearly a year and a half to get somewhere politically, and the armies he led had basically led

themselves.

The motivation, reward, and possibilities were sufficient for the fifth princeps to make his move, so it would be strange if he did not take his chance. If I had been in his situation, I would've done the same. Of course, that didn't mean I really thought the rebel would succeed.

"The moment that the emperor moves, the civil war will be crushed in no time," Malcoy stated, also predicting that the fifth princeps' bid for the throne would fail.

"What is important for Leonberg right now is how to use the imperial civil war."

Malcoy added that even if the rebellion failed, it should be used.

"If necessary, we need to prolong the civil war, even if we need to support the fifth princeps instead of the third."

I laughed, for I had tried so hard to make the third princeps emperor, but now the situation was such that I had to pay attention to the fifth. It was absurd that I was supporting the blood heirs of Burgundy. However, there was no reason for me to reject Malcoy's proposal. The longer the Empire's chaos persisted, the better for the kingdom.

To sow confusion, I had saved the third princeps and made sure he had gained renown. I had no reluctance to give power to the fifth princeps now.

"I never thought that I would be so involved in the Empire's affairs."

When I said it was near unthinkable that I was supporting the imperial principes, Malcoy made a weird sound and said that he himself didn't understand the way things were going.

"I never thought the fifth princeps would start a civil war," he said. "History has seen it a few times, but such actions are rare from those with Burgundy blood."

I didn't dare to correct Malcoy's misunderstanding.

"In any case, pay close attention to the Imperial Army's situation, and report to me as soon as you know more details," I said. I was about to get up when I suddenly heard a horn blowing.

‘Bawoo woo!’

It was signaling the approach of the Imperial Army. I headed straight up to the wall.

The senior rangers were sticking to the battlements and informed me of the situation.

“I don’t think they’re here to attack the citadel right now.”

I followed the gestures of a ranger and sighted the enemy in the distance. A group of fully-armed knights was looking at the citadel. They were well-organized, and I felt an unusual energy, but that was all. They seemed to have no intention of attacking. Even if they wanted to, a hundred or so knights could do nothing against this huge citadel.

“I don’t think they’re here to say goodbye.”

While I examined the situation, the enemy knights began to approach our position.

“What should we do? Should we shoot?”

The rangers looked at me as they raised their crossbows.

“Only give the order. The Iron Legion is ready to light a fire under their arses,” said a dwarf of the Iron Legion in a sweet tone. I shook my head.

“It looks like they have something to say, so let’s listen first.”

The imperial knights came to a halt right in front of the citadel, in crossbow range. The one who seemed to be the leader among them stepped forward and raised the visor on his helm, and began shouting in fluent Leonbergian.

“Kingdom of Leonberg, prepare to meet the ambassador of the Burgundy Empire!”

He said that they came as envoys.

“What is this about?”

The citadel’s knights were surprised by the sudden situation because they didn’t know what intention the Empire had to suddenly dispatch an envoy.

“If we listen to them, we will know.”

I instructed the citadel guard to open the gate.

The gate soon opened, and the imperial knight claiming to be an envoy, stepped into the citadel’s courtyard. I ordered him to stand beneath the wall and state his case. The imperial ambassador took an envelope out from under his arm.

“There is no poison.”

“There is no mana other than the magic used to seal it.”

The citadel knights and White Night Tower wizards checked the envelope, then one of them handed it over to me. The seal stamped on the envelope belonged to the Burgundy imperial family, the personal seal of the third princeps.

“Hell goes to a man who can’t control it.”

I shook my head and unsealed the envelope, pulled out the letter, and began to read.

“My dear brother!”

And those were the letter’s first words.

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